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Adventure
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Vol. 18
No. 2

July 18, 1918

Published Twice a Month by THE RIDGWAY COMPANY
J. H. GANNON, President
C. H. HOLMES, Secretary and Treasurer
Spring and Macdougal Streets - - New York City
6, Henrietta St., Covent Garden, London, W. C., England
Entered at the New York Post-Office as Second-Class Matter
ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN, Editor

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who gave you "Khlit," "Tal Taulai Khan," and other stirring stories of the adventurous Russian Cossack, *Khlit* the Wolf.

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THE MAROONER

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FIRST AUGUST ADVENTURE

Published Twice a Month **Yearly Subscription, $3.00 in advance** **Single Copy, Twenty Cents**

Foreign postage, $2.00 additional. Canadian postage, 60 cents.

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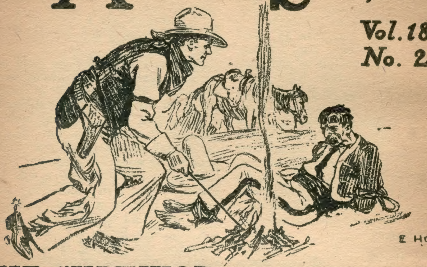
Adventure

July 18,
1918

Vol. 18
No. 2



THE SURVIVOR A Grim Love Story

A Complete Novel by Robert V. Carr

Author of "The Stronger Call," "Triplets Triumphant," etc.

CHAPTER I

HEMPER: a hotel, a saloon and gambling-house combined, a Mexican barbershop, a stage stable, several stores, and a fringe of houses, shacks and cabins. The town squatted in the pass between the purple peaks, Witch-talk and Rain-maker, looking out on the desert that stretched leagues to the south in chains of mesquite-cluttered, below-sea-level basins, barren, sun-rotted hills, and wind-swept mesas.

Uncle Charlie Hemper brooded in his throne-like chair on the wide porch of his hotel, the Hemper House. His sockless feet were incased in carpet slippers sized to house a jackrabbit; his vast linen trousers annoyed him not; his white shirt, ever collarless, fitted him as easily as a blanket; and his pipe drew freely. Yet, on his florid face, surmounted by a gray thatch, and seamed with tiny trails of humor, was an expression that betrayed a gnawing inner irritation. He rumbled deep disapproval as a dull thumping sound issued from the upper precincts of the hotel. Apparently some one was putting down a carpet.

"Pap" Tuttle, the oldest man in Hemper, approached the hotel on his daily round. *Tick-tack* of greasewood stick and whisper of congress shoes. A thin sigh, and Pap had found a chair.

The landlord used Pap as a word sink. One might shovel words into the withered ancient for a fortnight and be sure he would not resurrect them in the garb of gossip.

Uncle Charlie gave Pap a gloomy side-glance.

"Won't be any hotel left," he grumbled, "by the time things are in shape to suit that niece of mine. Pap, she wrote me that she had to have a bedroom for herself and a settin'-room, too. Then a bedroom for the boy, Dickie, her brother, with the whole side in a winder. Boy has weak lungs. And two four-hawse loads of plunder have come a'ready—pianer, books, pictures and ridin' outfits. They was left a world of

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money. My sister Mary, their mother, married a rich feller name of Wayne. Both dead now, and them two children with nothin' to do but spend the interest on a mountain of money."

He paused and glanced down the desert road.

"There comes King Norn on his big pinto—but, as I was sayin', that girl sure wants things to suit her. I'm all upset with gettin' ready for 'em. Pap, I'm gettin' too old for change and pullin' and haulin'. But I'll have to bear with them. The boy's sick, and they're my own flesh and blood."

Pap took out a plug of tobacco, cut into little half-severed squares out of courtesy to his toothlessness, broke off a square and placed it in his mouth. For several moments he stared vacantly at the landlord. Then his Adam's apple began running up and down excitedly. In a voice, squeaky from disuse, he abruptly questioned——

"Girl good lookin'?"

"Of course, you old coot," Uncle Charlie flung at him indignantly. "All my wimmin folks were good-lookin'. My sister was the finest-lookin' girl in Missouri."

Pap arose at a slant, and wagged his head gloomily. He helped himself to a fresh quid, and made a futile gesture as though warding off some impending disaster, and scuffed away.

"I hope," muttered the unreasonable Uncle Charlie virtuously, "I never get like that—always a-lookin' on the dark side of things, and a-gruntin' if things don't move along in the same old way."

Chang, the old Chinese who ruled the Hemper House kitchen, grunted hopelessly as Maria, one of his assistants, dropped a dish. Indians were fat, sleepy fools on whom one might not depend even to boil water. Maria, ignoring alike Chang's glare and the pottery fragments, moved over to the window and peered out shyly.

King Norn looked up from tying his horse, and saw the round, brown face, framed in heavy black braids, peering at him through the window.

He laughed at the quaint picture she made. He had known Maria since she was a roly-poly baby playing in the sun, and she held a warm spot in his affections. He held up a warning finger.

"Don't move. Close your eyes, and don't move. I've a present for you."

She obeyed his instructions, shutting her eyes tightly, and holding out her hands. He reached quickly into his saddle pocket, and brought to light what appeared to be a ball of down. This he placed in one of her outstretched hands. She opened her eyes quickly, startled by the warmth of the live thing she held.

"A young mocker I found by the roadside. Take care of him, Maria, and he will sing for you."

She gently smoothed the fledgling, the while she gave the man little shy glances of adoration. He had thought of her, bringing to her who was named Mocking Bird a little mocking bird. She fully appreciated the delicate compliment, but, though she could speak three languages, she could think of no fitting words to express her joy. She could only give the man a full adoring glance—a glance in which there was the poignant pain of a woman's love. But Norn was blind to that glance. She was still "the little brown one" to him. As he smoothed the fledgling in her hands, he failed to notice how her fingers raised to his as steel to magnet, and the sharp intake of her breath at the seemingly accidental contact.

He patted her head, admonished her to take good care of the mocker, pointed his finger at her, cocking the thumb as though shooting at her, and paused to see her smile. He had always been able to make her smile. Then he whirled and strode toward the front of the hotel, calling out a hearty greeting to Uncle Charlie, and vaulting over the side rail of the porch.

"Set down," invited Uncle Charlie, fumbling for his tobacco. "How's things goin' on out to your place?" He did not wait for Norn's answer, but went on hurriedly: "My niece and nephew are comin' in on today's stage. House all torn up." He aimed a wicked blow at a fly, missed, and sighed resignedly. "Your room's ready, if you figger on stayin' in tonight."

Norn seated himself on the floor of the porch, drawing up his feet Turk fashion, and looked up at the old man in the chair, a mixture of amusement and affection in his eyes.

"It will be good for you to have your own flesh and blood with you," the young man said.

Uncle Charlie admitted the truth of

Norn's statement with a nod, but his expression displayed little enthusiasm.

"Younguns take a lot of work, and always change things. Change always bothers a man as old as I be, although, Gawd knows, I'm as good as I ever was. I don't notice the time, but it's been quite a spell since I unyoked my bulls in this pass, and your paw come over from the ranch and give me the hand of friendship. Your paw was a great man, King. I felt like I'd lost a brother when he crossed the Big Divide. But everything changes, nothin' stays. Yesterday this pass was a mess of greaseweed, catclaw, and cottonwoods. Today she holds a town, and the stage gets in regular. Tomorrow a railroad will come along, and the Hemper House won't be good enough for the soft ones that ride on cushions. Perhaps I'll be gone then; hope so."

Norn settled his head back against a pillar, knowing that Uncle Charlie had to do a certain amount of mental wandering before striking the main trail of thought.

"What I was goin' to say," the old man concluded, "was that I'd like you to meet my niece and nephew. The boy's sickly-like—lungs, I guess—and I may be askin' you to take him out to your ranch for a spell. As for the girl I've give up tryin' to figger out what to do for her. There's nothin' here for a girl."

"No," echoed Norn sympathetically, "there is nothing here for a girl."

The rancher thought of the life he led, free as that of any barbaric prince. Hemper would be a prison to a woman used to crowds, and light and laughter. He could only endure about so much of it, and then New York, London or Paris, to become an immaculately-garbed spectator of the thick-flowing city life. Then weariness and boredom, and finally a swift winging back to his beloved mountains and desert.

But Uncle Charlie's niece would have to remain with her sick brother. No pleasure trips to break the monotony of life in a man's town on the desert's edge. Must be an unusual woman to make such a sacrifice. Still, he did not propose to entangle himself in the destinies of Uncle Charlie's relatives. They might come out to his ranch that sprawled in the lap of Rainmaker, and hunt and fish, but he wouldn't clutter up his life with their troubles.

THE main street of Hemper quickened into life. The stage from the west was due in a few minutes. Men came strolling toward the hotel, looking at their watches. The arrival of the stage from the west was a momentous affair to the citizens of Hemper, though they pretended to treat the event with lofty indifference.

"Chance" Hardy, the cold-eyed, flat-cheekboned, black-haired proprietor of the saloon and gambling-house across the street, strode over to the hotel porch, greeted Norn casually, and settled himself in a wicker chair. He lighted a cigar, flicking out the match with a supple white finger.

Uncle Charlie waddled into the hotel office and secured a huge telescope. Steadying the telescope against a porch pillar, he fitted the eyepiece under a shaggy brow.

Then, triumphantly—

"There she is—just comin' over the last raise!"

With a bear-like shamble he returned to the office, carefully replaced the telescope on its ancient pegs, and sought the kitchen to spur Chang to action. Breathing heavily, he returned to the porch. Running a hotel was strenuous work.

Old Pat, the stage-driver, usually attempted a flourish as he came into Hemper. He cracked the long whip, and halted the steaming leaders on a line exactly even with the porch, giving himself the indifferent air of a conquering hero. He was king of the reins, and not for gold or precious jewels would he do anything but drive the four. The removal of baggage and mail was the work of menials, and he would not demean himself by lifting a pound.

The stage door opened and a large, fleshy, well-dressed man, with a round, dimpled chin, stepped down gingerly, fearful of getting dust on his shining shoes. He gave the loungers on the porch a cursory glance, and pushed his way past Uncle Charlie.

"Driver, what have you done with my baggage?"

Pat looked down at the big, soft face, and drawled insultingly:

"I got something else to do besides thinkin' about your baggage. Leastwise, I didn't eat it."

The fat man retired in confusion, and the loungers on the porch smiled grimly. Old Pat was a hard pill.

Uncle Charlie was giving various orders

to Maria's father who had come from the rear of the hotel to care for the baggage. The old man was excited, and sought to conceal that unusual condition by bellowing orders at the patient old Indian.

Norn still retained his seat on the floor of the porch, not deigning to look at the stage. He was not posing. The arrival of the stage meant nothing to him, for he had a vast stock of memories of cities and strange places from which to draw comfort.

Presently, a thin boy in knickerbockers descended from the stage.

"Dickie!" yelled Uncle Charlie, seizing the lad and lifting him from the ground. "I'm your uncle, boy!"

Dickie smiled politely. The old man gave his nephew a hearty smack, and gently pushed him toward the porch. The boy saw Norn seated on the floor, and smiled faintly as the man gave him a friendly glance.

"Poor youngster," thought the rancher, "he has arrived just in time."

Uncle Charlie thought at first he had a touch of sun-stroke. He had always boasted that his sister was the most beautiful girl in Missouri, but he was not prepared for the vision of beauty that descended from the stage, assisted by the fat stranger who seemed to have preempted the part of cavalier. Then pride of blood surged up in the old man. This calm, gracious, beautiful woman was his niece.

"Uncle Charlie!" she murmured; and slipped her arms around the old man's neck and kissed him.

Gone forever were Uncle Charlie's grumblings concerning the trouble that relatives make an old man. She stepped fairly into his heart. A rich emotion welled up within him.

"Darned old fool I am, Dora. I'm so blind I can't see you." He held her off at arm's length. But all he could say was, "Oh, girl! Oh, girl!"

The fat stranger attempted to escort Miss Wayne to the porch, but Uncle Charlie gave him a terrible glare, and put a proprietary arm around his niece.

Chance Hardy arose, and Norn, not looking up, but knowing that a woman was present, got to his feet. The other men stepped back awkwardly.

"This is Mr. Hardy," Uncle Charlie began, proudly. "Mr. Hardy, my niece, Miss Dora Wayne."

Hardy raised his dark gaze to the cool violet eyes of the girl and flinched inwardly. As he noted her loveliness, the utter warm womanliness of her, his hands tightened until his knuckles whitened. He removed his hat and bowed with a grace that surprised those who knew him. The girl lightly acknowledged the pleasure of meeting Mr. Hardy.

NORN was the last to be presented. He bowed, and then, as their eyes met, he imagined that he felt a sudden stab of pain in his chest—a pang of the spirit that could hardly be distinguished from physical pain. He strove to speak, marveling at the fact that he, a man of the world, was stricken dumb. But he gathered his forces and managed to remark—

"Doubtless you have had a hard trip."

Even as he spoke he noted the sickening inanity of his words.

"Oh, no," she coolly returned. "I greatly enjoyed it."

She was moving toward the office door. Dickie had taken her hand, and Uncle Charlie was holding her arm. The fat stranger sprang forward to open the door.

Each man on the porch cursed himself for a blockhead. Not one of them had said anything worth while, and not one had thought to open the screen door. The fat stranger clung to the happy trio until they reached the stairway. Then he returned to the porch, and introduced himself to the somber-faced Hemperites as G. Holden Brown, interested in the resources of the country—ahem! No one made any comment, and one by one the men of Hemper departed, leaving the stranger in possession of the porch. Hardy, however, gave the fat man a deadly ophidian stare.

"That fat stranger thinks well of himself," Hardy remarked over his shoulder, as he and Norn entered the saloon.

Hardy, Norn thought, was already attracted by the girl's beauty.

The bartender, knowing the rancher's habits, set him out a glass of mineral water. Hardy joined him, taking a cigar at his cool invitation.

"Says he's interested in the resources of the country," sneered Hardy. "G. Holden Brown, hey! G. Holden *Mush* would be better."

Yes, concluded Norn, Hardy was interested in Uncle Charlie's niece, else why should he be annoyed at the prancing of the fat stranger. The Hardy way with women was cold, utterly selfish and brutal to the extreme. A smile as cold as starlight on snow crept into Norn's eyes. Would that violet-eyed, dark-haired, full-blown woman travel the trail of those the gambler had discarded? If that was the Hardy plan, he would endeavor to block it. But why? A man was free to seek any woman. Again that pang—that curious pang. Intuition told him that Hardy was about to comment on the girl's beauty. He must escape before the gambler mouthed her name. Didn't like the idea of talking about any woman in a saloon. Yes; that was it—any woman.

He fairly flung himself from the saloon, and hurried to his horse. He felt a desire to get into the desert silence, and classify and brand the unruly thoughts milling in his mind.

As he vaulted into the saddle, he glimpsed Billy Snake, a Piute renegade, prowling in the cottonwoods near the road. The Indian, as the rancher dashed down the desert road, stared after him with eyes that flamed murderous hatred.

Now, Billy, being of mature age, greatly desired a squaw, and had selected Maria for that honor. But her parents, being Mission Indians, looked down on the vagabond Piute, and refused him the hospitality of their cabin back of the hotel kitchen.

Billy had then threatened Maria's father with various unpleasant deaths, promising lastly to cut out the old Indian's heart and eat it raw. A furious gabbling had ensued. Uncle Charlie, hearing the clamor, had rushed back, and incontinently kicked the Piute into the road.

And, then, to add to the black rage bubbling thickly in his heart, Billy had seen Norn give Maria the fledgling.

Maria had prepared a nest for the mocker in a cigar box, resolving later to weave a little cage of willow withes for the beloved birdling. She missed seeing Norn depart, Uncle Charlie having sent her up-stairs to begin her duties as maid to his niece.

Dora's beauty, the richness of her garb, made the shy Indian girl feel as though she had been appointed handmaiden to some divinity. Dora gently instructed her in her duties which were light and simple.

Mrs. Milliken, a motherly soul whom Uncle Charlie has secured to take charge of Dickie, arrived and proceeded to win the heart of the boy.

When Dora had excused Maria for the afternoon, the Indian girl returned to her fledgling, and took it out to the step of the cabin. There, with many murmured endearments, she wove for it a little cage of willow withes.

Billy Snake crouched low in the shadows of the cottonwoods. Maria could not see him from where she sat, but he could plainly see her at her labor of love. When the time of reckoning came, the gift of the white man would be destroyed. Perhaps the white man would follow the way of his gift.

Billy had come to town with a message from certain desert rovers to Hardy. That message had been delivered, and he had been slipped his reward, a quart of whisky. He would return to the desert and drink the whisky. The water of fire that gave a man the courage to do and to dare anything would tell him how to destroy the white man and his gift, and how to secure the squaw.

So thinking, he sought his pony tethered beyond the cottonwoods, and sped back to the desert.

The little cage grew in the deft hands of Maria. Ah, he had remembered her—had brought her a gift! A living bird that would in time sing to her sweetly. And her soul in anticipation of the bird-song, sang blithely within her.

Old Chang in the kitchen door shook his head. She, an Indian girl, made too much of the white man's gift. But that was a woman's way: like a child playing in the sunlight, all heedless of the coming of night.

CHAPTER II

AS NORN struck the edge of the desert, down to which the pass abruptly sloped, he asked himself the strange question: was it possible for him to become seriously interested in any woman? Did they not all talk the same talk? Knowing the love of one was to know the love of hundreds. But a recurrence of that curious pang wrung from him the admission that this woman who was named Dora Wayne might be different.

There was a sphinx-like air about her, a slumbering mystery. She rested secure in her beauty, looking out on the world of contending men, serene and indifferent. Here was no ordinary beauty, merely skin-deep. Doubtless many men had desperately endeavored to rouse her interest. She had traveled the world over; she had many memories of men. She knew their word-formulæ, their strutting egotisms.

What then, admitting an interest in her, would a man have to do to attract her attention? Long he pondered that question. Perhaps, a circle of danger drawn around her would eliminate many men, but she could always give any man safe conduct with her smile. A man might encircle her with gun-smoke, and she could dispel it with a little smile.

Yes, many men had come to her with the old, hackneyed phrases, parading their self-imagined virtues and beating the drum of egotism.

What of the stranger—G. Holden Brown—whose well-tailored clothes failed to conceal the lumps of superfluous flesh? Uncle Charlie had said nothing of his niece having a business manager. Possibly the fat man was one of those blatant idiots, a train or a stage acquaintance. He gave Brown considerable thought, knowing that not infrequently a wise woman is won by that glib, persistent type.

Then she might be engaged to be married. But no solitaire had warned "No trespassing." Not that a ring would make any difference. He had always told himself that, when he met the right woman, no bar of society would hold him back, providing she favored him.

Granting then that no rival in the outside world gripped her thought, there remained only the desert men. The fame of her beauty would travel across the wastes with the mysterious swiftness of thought. Hard-bitten, bronze-jawed men would travel through heat and dust to gaze upon this Aphrodite sojourning for a time amid earthly surroundings. Having once viewed the goddess they would think no thoughts save the long thoughts of her.

But, he anticipated, only the strong would have an opportunity to worship at her shrine. Then he considered that mysterious weakness of woman, recalling several wonder-women who had mated with scrawny, insignificant men. And did not Dora Wayne treat her weakling brother with great tenderness?

Norn rode straight into the desert basin beyond the pass in which Hemper cuddled. The basin was guarded on the south by Witch-talk Mountain and on the northwest by Rain-maker.

Witch-talk was so named by the Indians because of periodical rumblings within its bowels. At such times the savages declared "the witch" was talking, and hastened to propitiate her with gifts. To the southeast from both peaks ran ranges of barren desert hills.

Witch-talk imposed his mighty bulk between the ocean rains and the desert, but occasionally some persistent and intrepid cloud would creep around the shoulder of the mountain and battle with the sun, only to be vanquished and retreat in a mist of childish tears.

At such times a rainbow would smile across the pass as though to comfort the defeated cloud.

Over that desert basin Nature often projected a moving picture of the moods of every zone: a storm raging on the peaks, rain and darkness in the pass, a light shower over the edge of the basin, and to the east a clear sky and a blazing sun. In the basin grew the semi-tropic wild palm, but, in a few hours' ride, one could be in deep snow amid giant pines. To Norn, there was a never-ending charm to the desert basin that called him back from his world wanderings again and again.

He headed for a lonely group of palms that lifted their proud heads some twenty miles from Hemper. There his riders had constructed a board shack, and a horse-shelter. There was always a little food in the shack. It was one of several camps scattered about over his cattle range. Beneath the palms a sort of salt grass grew thickly, and there was open water.

Norn loosed his faithful pinto. He had not eaten since dawn, and he was ravenously hungry. He shot a rabbit with his saddle gun, dressed it, and soon had it sizzling in a frying pan over a camp-fire in front of the shack. He made a sort of "dough-god" of corn-meal, and propped it up by the fire. He thoroughly enjoyed the meal. Though he had sufficient money to have had a sumptuous meal served him in that camp, he preferred the simple and primitive.

He threw several chunks of mesquite on the glowing embers, and then drew back a little into the shadows.

What a friendly thing is a fire, talking to one with little intimate whispers interspersed with crackles of laughter. How many lonely, weary adventurers have seen from afar the beckoning flame of a friendly fire, and tightened belt and quickened pace! And how many incautious men in the lonely places have forgotten that the little fire innocently tells tales to those who prey!

The desert night deepened, and over the black, serrated crest of Witch-talk the stars seemed to be signaling one another with pulsations of radiance.

Some sense of an alien presence made the rancher seize his rifle, and leap to his feet and back into the deeper shadows. Through the mesquite he caught a faint gleam of steel. He eased his rifle forward, covered that faint gleam of steel, and waited, finger pressing back trigger, thumb holding hammer.

THE lightning-like disappearance of the white man disconcerted Billy Snake, who had been craftily maneuvering through the low-hanging mesquite to get a clear view of the mocking-bird-giver, and to close the account with one shot. Perhaps Norn, who, men said, was like a panther in the night, was now watching him, waiting for the slightest hostile move. The Indian was not equal to the strain and suspense. He arose, making a loud pretense of stamping down the mesquite, and stalked into the circle of firelight.

"Drop your rifle," twanged Norn, from the gloom.

Billy obeyed, knowing that death beckoned.

Then the rancher came from the shadows, seized the Indian's shoulder and turned him around that the firelight might illuminate his crafty countenance. The white man looked deep into the glittering eyes.

"Haven't I always given you grub?" he demanded.

Billy Snake nodded sullenly.

"Then why do you creep up to my fire like a coyote in the night?"

"Me come speak for Bundy," said the Piute. "Me no see Norn by fire. Me look long time—maybe nudder man by fire. Sabe?"

"Yes, I sabe," said Norn, releasing the savage, "but that is Indian talk. Your heart is bad against me."

Billy's eyes grew dull as a snake's in skin-shedding time. The white man was mocking him, trying to trap him with words.

"Bundy him come now," said the Indian finally; and seated himself on the ground by the fire.

A moment later Norn heard the clink of spurs, and "Rat" Bundy, followed by several members of his gang, entered the circle of firelight.

"Saw your fire," Bundy opened, with great pretense of friendship, "and Billy offered to come and see if it was you or one of your riders."

Norn gave the Indian a chill smile.

Billy Snake slowly reached for his rifle, and, having secured it, backed away, mumbling something about watching the horses.

Bundy and his men, all heavily armed, dropped down into various positions of comfort around the fire.

Norn remained standing, holding his rifle with apparent carelessness but in such a position that it easily dominated his self-bidden guests. Between him and the Bundy gang of cattle-rustlers and man-killers existed an armed truce. It was understood that in time of need the gang might kill a Norn steer, but they must not waste the meat or sell it. This agreement had come down to Norn from his father and the leader of the gang that had preceded the Bundy aggregation. The agreement had followed a battle between the elder Norn and the old gang in which the former had been victorious to such an extent that the remaining outlaws resolved to patch up a truce with him.

The old gang had never broken the truce, and, so far as King Norn knew, the Bundy gang had observed it faithfully. The Bundy gang saw in King Norn a more relentless man than his father, and had no desire to risk the loss of members they knew would surely follow an open break. They might kill King Norn, but the price of his life was too high. Better eat his beef, and keep on friendly terms. Then Bundy was not the indomitable wolf of the desert that the old gang leader had been. This latter fact, coupled with that of no visible degeneration in the Norn stock, held the old truce intact.

"Thought we might drift into town tonight," Bundy said, lazily. "Cool ridin'."

The rustler was attempting to make conversation, but Norn gave him no encouragement. The rancher wanted to be alone with his thoughts.

Silence oppressed Bundy. He stirred uneasily, and proceeded to let his tongue rattle.

"Billy Snake come from town today. He says Hemper's folks come in."

Norn was in no mood to discuss the arrival of "Hemper's folks" with what he considered desert scum. Bundy fumbled for a twig to light his cigaret.

"Billy says," and the outlaw leader smirked broadly, "that the girl is ace-high for looks." He laughed coarsely, as he raised the blazing twig to his cigaret. "I'll soon have a good look at her. Good-lookin' fillies are scarce in this man's country. I'm goin' to——"

"You stand no chance," cut in Pete, Bundy's first lieutenant. "Let her get one look at that horned-toad face of yours, and you're through."

"Oh, I don't know," drawled Bundy, good-naturedly. "I may not be pretty, but I got a winnin' way."

Pete snorted derisively.

"Winnin' way," he repeated several times, with infinite sarcasm. "I got money that says you couldn't hold a Mex señorita's hand if she was asleep."

The other members of the gang laughed hoarsely. They were used to the bantering between their chief and his lieutenant. But in the patrician heart of Norn seethed a white rage. These animals were discussing *her*. He knew the sliminess of their minds.

The blatant egotism of Bundy regarding his ability as a winner of woman's favor was now in full and noisy action.

He flipped his cigaret stub into the fire, and turned to taunt Pete.

"Tell you what I'll do, Pete. Bet you a hundred gold agin' your black hawse that I'm the first man in this country to kiss the new girl."

He unbuttoned his shirt, and began clawing at his money belt.

Pete made no reply to the offer, since he was gazing fascinatedly at Norn who was bending toward Bundy.

The outlaw leader looked up, and what he saw in Norn's eyes made his hand cease its money-belt fumbling, and stray down toward his weapon.

* * *

IN NORN'S eyes was the cold sheen of bayonets, his nostrils flared, and his lips were parted in a terrible smile. The members of the gang were absolutely motionless. Each man knew that the slightest move would precipitate deadly action. Norn might be killed, but several of them would die before he succumbed to the gang's lead.

Pete had no illusions concerning his own woman-winning powers, and Bundy's weakness filled him with contempt for the man who held his leadership largely through the dominance and power of a man who sat in town—Chance Hardy.

"Rat," snarled Pete, "you'd better lay off that fool talk." Then, to Norn conciliatingly, "Rat's head needs fixin'."

Bundy saw that his gang was not in favor of precipitating a battle with King Norn, and for some reason Norn was displeased with the talk concerning the girl. Probably Norn's way; he had heard the rancher did not favor talk concerning any woman.

He raised his pale eyes, shaded by sun-bleached brows, to Norn's deadly gaze.

"No harm meant, Norn," he half-apologized, with a nervous laugh. "Pete and me are always drivin' back and forth like that."

Norn backed into the shadows. Some of the men arose, and stretched. Pete glanced contemptuously at Bundy. He was a poor sort for men to tie to; no policy, no mind to see down the trail. Some day he, Pete, would grow weary of playing second to such a bungler, and then the voice of Bundy would be heard no more in the land.

There was now no good reason for protracting their stay at the Norn camp.

"Well, *adios*," said Bundy, as they moved toward the mesquite.

Norn made no reply. He watched them as they made their way through the mesquite, cursing the malicious thorns. He heard Bundy's coarse laughter as he launched some ribald jest, and the reproving grumble of Pete.

The voice of Bundy, insolent and raw, came drifting back to him.

"The bet with Pete goes as it lays," yelled back the outlaw chief.

Then the dull *plomp-plomp* of hoofs in the sand, and at last silence.

Norn made a vain attempt to analyze his feelings. Why had Bundy's blatting aroused in him the killing rage? Was it solely because of his chivalry, or was it because that he was growing weak? He knew that the only true method was to waste no time in rage or emotion, but to plan quickly and then act. Still, now that he was calm, he could not blame Bundy so much. The man was proceeding according to his light.

It came to Norn that were the Kohinoor lost in the desert and some slow fool found it, he would not long hold it. He would soon be destroyed, and he who finally held the Kohinoor would be a man in whom the will to live had the combined strength of those who had died striving to hold the jewel. One at a time they would perish, until finally came the strong man. They who strove to hold the Kohinoor might not be blamed, though one expressed his desire in terms of filth, and another in classic language.

A jewel of a woman—a Kohinoor of beauty—had come to a little town on the desert's edge. But the Kohinoor lacked one quality the woman possessed. She could say who should be the guardian of her beauty. Her word was final. After men had struggled, suffered, dared and died, she might say—

"Away with them all."

But Bundy and his ilk did not recognize her power of choice. In their thick egotism they imagined that they had only to pursue. Seeking the elusive woman they would meet death face to face. They did not know that the high-caste woman must be attracted, not pursued.

The rancher flung himself down, and attempted to sleep. A rattler buzzed faintly, and he arose, hunted out the snake and killed it with his quirt.

"His warning brought his death," muttered the man. "The fool among snakes."

What folly it was to think. He walked beyond the palms and looked out at the gray waste and up at the paling stars. All his furious mental scurrying to and fro was caused by a woman who was now calmly sleeping. He laughed harshly.

Then he walked back to his horse, and petted it, talking to it childishly. He even secured some wisps of grass and rubbed down the animal.

Dawn came with glowing bronze bars across the eastern sky, and Rain-maker shimmering in opalescent haze. A light breeze stirred the dry beards of the palms to faint cracklings and elusive whisperings. Then the thin, querulous morning song of the coyotes.

Soon the keen smell of frying bacon and aroma of boiling coffee arose to mingle with the tang of greasewood and aromatic shrub.

Norn smiled. Though a man's soul roamed the stars, his clamoring stomach must be appeased.

Through a notch in the mottled hills the red sun winked wickedly, promising the desert a scorching day. Norn mounted, and trotted back to the stage road that twisted like a wounded snake across the basin. Coming to the branch road leading to his ranch, he reined in, hooked a leg around the saddle horn, and debated. Then the final decision closed his lips in a thin line, and he turned and galloped toward Hemper.

CHAPTER III

BUNDY was Hardy's choice, and therein lay the true source of the Bundy chieftainship. The gangling cattle-rustler was very pliable in the hands of the gambler. Hardy knew that a more positive character would not long bring him tribute while he sat in soft ease in the town.

Hardy handled the money derived from sales of stolen cattle and horses, allowing himself a liberal commission. Ultimately the bulk of the money he turned over to the gang found its way back to his safe via bar and gambling-table.

Of course, like any feudal chief, Hardy protected his men, loaning them money and paying their doctor bills. Men not operating with the gang but necessary to the Hardy welfare came in for a share of his largesse. Among his partisans he numbered complaisant officers of the law who, instead of hunting down the gang, spent most of their time in Hardy's saloon, making no move without consulting him. Hardy's saloon was the courtroom of the desert country, and, to a large extent, the gambler was judge and jury.

But between Uncle Charlie and the gambler existed an agreement as to division of territory. Uncle Charlie was to control the hotel and not to be disturbed or annoyed by the Hardy partisans. Hardy was to keep his men under control, and not permit them to annoy the peaceable citizens of the community or to disturb Hemper House guests. Uncle Charlie, though a wise man in all other respects, had a pet delusion regarding his position in Hemper. He regarded himself as a sort of perennial mayor of the place.

In this delusion Hardy indulged the old man, consulting him on affairs of no importance. The desert men, the gambler knew, regarded Uncle Charlie with the veneration they might accord an old landmark. This, combined with the fact that the old man was no mean warrior, held the Hardy policy close to the line of indulgence.

At times various members of the gang made some pretense of working in the mines or riding on the cattle round-ups, but generally they were swinging back and forth from the pass to the Mexican border, heavily armed, superbly mounted, and in search of booty. There were other gangs operating across the Mexican border, and the cattle-rustling industry was fairly well organized. At times the gang would make a little side-venture and relieve some unwary travelers of their valuables, but they carefully avoided stage hold-ups, and wisely refrained from invading the thickly-settled country west of the pass. They had no desire to bring a flock of San Francisco and Los Angeles deputies down on them.

Bundy and his men racked into Hemper in the early morning, leaving their horses in the stage stable corral, and headed straight for the saloon where they expected to meet Hardy and receive some hard-earned gold. Hardy, however, was asleep in his room over the saloon, and the gang dulled the sharp edge of impatience with several rounds of drinks. Billy Snake, who had brought them the news of the gold being at their disposal, was handed a big drink through the back window.

Breakfast was next in order, and they removed their belts and secreted their guns inside their shirts. Uncle Charlie's rules forbade armed men entering his hotel, and they thus evaded any clash with the landlord.

That one big drink had elevated the spirits of Billy Snake until he believed himself to be the equal of any white man. Vaguely he recalled a certain disagreeableness on the part of the old man who ran the hotel, but that was a small matter. He was hungry, and would eat with the man he served. He joined the gang as they clattered into the hotel office.

Uncle Charlie reached back of the table that served for a desk and secured his old Buffalo gun, an octagon-barreled Sharpe's. The great rifle called for a cartridge that might pass as the offspring of a field-piece shell, a sort of brass bridegroom of death with a paper collar around the bullet. He who was hit with a bullet from that gun need not worry about doctor bills. Uncle Charlie claimed that he had killed seven Apaches with one shot from the old bellower. The Indians were in single file, and one bullet sufficed for the unlucky seven, according to the bland statement of the landlord.

"What's that Injun doin' in here?" roared the irate old man. "I kicked him out'n my backyard once! Do I have to shoot him out of this place now?"

Bundy turned and regarded Billy with well-feigned polite surprise.

"Well," he drawled finally, "an Injun's got to eat same as white folks."

"Then send him around to the kitchen door, and see that he behaves himself. Any shenannigins, and I'll unhook on him."

"Go around to the kitchen," Bundy ordered his runner. "And don't get funny back there with the help."

Billy Snake retired sullenly, his eye on the muzzle of the great rifle.

"Move quick," Uncle Charlie warned him. "This trigger pulls easy."

The Indian hastily retreated.

Uncle Charlie tenderly replaced his rifle in its sacred corner.

"Ought to have got that Injun," he told himself mournfully. "He's a bad one. I ought to have got him."

The gang clumped into the dining-room, and were soon immersed in trencher-toil, consuming vast quantities of bacon and pancakes. Bundy looked about him eagerly, expecting to see Uncle Charlie's relatives enter and seat themselves at the family table. Pete grinned as he read Bundy's thoughts. Bundy would never make good his boast of being the first man to kiss the new girl.

BILLY SNAKE brooded for a time in the cottonwoods, and then slowly approached the hotel kitchen door. Maria was in the kitchen preparing breakfast for Dora and Dickie which she would later serve in one of the living-rooms up-stairs. Chang was the first to see the Indian in the doorway, and his fingers tightened on the bread-knife he held.

"Charlie say me get grub all right," said the Indian to Chang, but with his burning eyes on Maria.

Chang pointed at the clock, and made a gesture with the knife that told the Indian that the Chinese would serve him in his own sweet time.

The whisky fumes flared up in the Indian's brain, and he stepped into the kitchen. Maria sidled back against the kitchen table as she realized the Paiute was coming toward her. His hand reached out to clutch her. She seized a pan of dishwater and flung it full in his face. Chang then sprang into action. He dropped the knife, seized a ladle of hot grease and sprayed it over the bewildered Indian. Billy beat a swift retreat, howling like a dog. Chang secured more ammunition, and stood ready to repel any attack, the while he emitted weird, shrill Chinese expletives.

The gang in the dining-room heard the commotion, and tipped over their chairs and crowded into the kitchen. They surged out the back door in time to see Billy Snake do a mad dance, and tear his thin shirt from his body. They laughed brutally, and Bundy indulged in such wild mirth as to acquire a severe case of hiccups. Billy tore the last vestage of his shirt from his body and then dashed toward an irrigation ditch into which he plunged and rolled. Uncle Charlie had seized his rifle and had broken all his speed records in a dash to the back door of the kitchen.

"I'll have to kill that gosh-blanked Injun yet!" he bawled to the tittering hiccupping Bundy. "This is the second time he's tried to get gay with Maria. I'll sure bust him next time. Chang give him a dose he won't forget, though."

The gang returned to their trencher-toil, laughing and commenting on Billy's intricate dance steps.

"I swear," gurgled Bundy, "that Injun stepped like a turkey on a hot iron. I wouldn't a missed it for a pair of new boots. First Maria with dishwater and then the Chink with hot grease. Billy sure has troubles with his courtin'."

The gang leader interspersed his food-shoveling with inane titters and explosive hiccups.

Uncle Charlie returned to the office, rumbling disapproval of the whole affair. His face was a thundercloud, as the gang came from the dining-room and paid him for their breakfasts.

The men drifted out on the porch, and paused to roll cigarets. Slowly they straggled across the street to the saloon, and began gambling. They would dip deeper into the fleshpots of Hemper when Hardy came with the big money derived from the last sale of stolen cattle.

Bundy, however, preferred whisky to gambling; and, when Hardy strolled into the saloon, the cattle-thief was pleasantly intoxicated, taking a large friendly view of himself, considering all things possible. What he, Bundy, desired to do, he would do; nothing could stop him. He had made a certain bet. Very well, in good time he would win that bet. But, barring Pete, the members of the gang had forgotten the bet, for Bundy was prone to make boastful declarations which he sometimes made good, but more often later waved aside as a mere joke. Among themselves ~~his men~~ referred to him as "Windy."

Hardy called the gang into a card-room, and gave them their share of the cattle-money in good, red gold. They immediately returned to the games.

Bundy was oiling his physical and mental machinery for an unusual effort. Several times he sought the front door to inspect the hotel porch. No girl in sight yet. A drink, and a dollar or two on roulette. Then he secured his cartridge-belt from the bartender, and performed a little dance. No one paid any attention to him. He was enjoying himself, which was his sacred privilege.

But Bundy had failed to note the arrival of King Norn who had ordered a helper at the stage barn to place his pinto in a stall. It was too early for the regular dinner, but Chang, at Uncle Charlie's request, and a liberal donation from Norn, prepared for the rancher what is technically known as a "short order."

While Norn was eating, Dora and her brother sauntered down-stairs and out on the porch, intending to take a little stroll.

Bundy, meanwhile, had made his way down to the stage barn corral, and saddled his horse. He rode into the main street of Hemper, noted the girl on the porch, and proceeded to show off. He was drunk, but in full control of his physical machinery. The whisky had merely expanded his egotism, causing him to believe that he was all-powerful, and the cleverest creature ever released by kindly nature.

Dickie was greatly entertained by Bundy's cowboy stunts, and frequently called his sister's attention to the feats of the rider. Bundy would fling down his handkerchief, whirl his horse, and race back, leaning from the saddle to snatch up the handkerchief. Then he would waggle his head, and look at the impassive girl on the porch as though to say—

"Look at me; didn't I do that clever?"

But the girl was not interested in the riding and the cowboy stunts of the flamboyant creature with the wide mouth. She had wearied of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, with its picked riders, and she had yawned when a Cossack officer in Moscow had put his whole troop through its paces in honor of her. Drunken Bundy, cheap and sordid, with his little tricks, was of no more interest to her than an organ-grinder's monkey.

She arose and murmured to her brother that they would take a little walk. Dickie linked his arm in hers, and they walked down the steps and turned toward the line of cottonwoods beyond the irrigation ditch. Norn came out on the porch as the girl and her brother approached the ditch.

A few of the gang, including Pete, had been attracted from the games by Bundy's street performance. They stood watching him. Hardy spoke sharply to Pete.

"Better tell Bundy to quit that," he snapped; and returned to his little sanctum at the end of the bar near the entrance.

As the girl and her brother strolled toward the irrigation ditch, Bundy whirled his horse. So intent was he on handling his horse properly, and turning the trick neatly, that he failed to see Norn near the side rail of the hotel porch.

Suddenly the girl was aware of the bulk of a sweating horse, and then a long arm whipped around her waist. Whisky fumes, and a beastly face lowered to hers. Then a form descended on the horse's croup and the beastly face was jerked back. She caught the flash of a gun, as Norn snatched Bundy's six-shooter from the holster and tossed it aside. The girl staggered back, but Dickie, realizing that the rider had attempted to seize his sister, broke into shrill boyish imprecations, and strove to break from his sister's detaining grasp.

Norn's left arm was now a rope of steel around Bundy's neck. The rustler involuntarily spurred his horse, and the animal plunged across the ditch, and on through the cottonwoods, pitching and bucking with his double burden. Bundy lost the reins, and both men were hurled to the ground. Norn was up first, and jammed his knee in the small of Bundy's back, while he wrenched the rustler's right arm back and up. Bundy answered with a groan from the depths of his being.

Convinced that the six- shooter had been Bundy's sole weapon, Norn leaped back from him. Bundy gained his feet, and stared stupidly at his assailant.

Norn slapped him with his open hand.

"Fight," snapped the rancher.

BUNDY gave a wild squeal of rage, and charged down with fists swinging like flails. Norn could have knocked him cold, but he wanted to save him for punishment. So he proceeded to send in hard, heart-shaking blows to certain vulnerable parts of the Bundy body. Bundy followed the evasive rancher about, whining like a dog, and cursing; but Norn whipped in a terrible blow to a spot just under the heart, and Bundy paused to meet the agony that followed. But he had no more than met that agony when the Norn fist struck him dully in a point over the short ribs, and more agony followed. This was repeated many times. Then Norn began on the man's solar plexus, sending in blow after blow until it became a quivering center of agony.

Billy Snake, glowering over his grease burns, watched the fight with awe. The man who was his master could not touch the mocking-bird-giver. Billy did not like fist-fights; they struck him as nasty work. A knife would be much quicker and cleaner.

Bundy was now whistling like a wind-broken horse, and Norn shifted his attack to the man's face and head. He proceeded to batter the Bundy features to a pulp, carefully refraining from striking the base of the jaw. Then suddenly from the bloody lips of the rustler, broke the thin whine that seeps from the innermost core and calls for the mercy stroke.

Norn shifted lightly to the left and swung on the base of the Bundy jaw, with his full weight back of the blow. Bundy sank slowly to his knees, and then sprawled over on his back.

Norn returned to the hotel to find Uncle Charlie resting his Sharpe's against a porch pillar, his old eye blazing across the sights at a group of men in front of the saloon.

"They were goin' to interfere," the old man gritted, "but I sort of made 'em change their minds. Did you whup him good?"

Norn made no reply, but glanced at the girl who regarded him coldly. He went into the hotel washroom. Apparently she had no garlands to place on his manly brow for having trounced the very life out of the man who had attempted to kiss her. Well, he couldn't blame her much. It was tiresome, disagreeable business, and she was doubtless disgusted with the whole male population of Hemper. But he could not have done any different. Whether she liked it or not, Bundy would no more seek to attract her attention. He washed his face and hands, and removed the soil of battle from his clothing.

"I guess Mr. Norn nearly laid that man out," remarked Dickie. "If I'd been big enough, I would have laid him out, you bet."

His sister smiled indulgently, and then sighed wearily. After all that man Norn, though greatly touted by her uncle, was like all the rest of them, ever seeking to show off his brute strength, ever parading his masculinity. Still, it was a manly thing to relieve her of the annoyance of the creature on the horse. She was forced to admit that Norn had made no parade following the fight. He had merely glanced at her.

She recalled the strutting Italian officer who had fought a duel with a fellow-officer because he imagined that by such means he could gain her favor. The Italian had come to her after the duel, boasting of his swordsmanship, and had been surprised and crushed beyond measure when she dismissed him abruptly. Then there was the New York clubman who had trounced an imagined rival in front of her apartments. After the fight the clubman had come to her, expecting to be garlanded with her favor. Instead, she had told him that the greatest favor he could show her would be to remove his being from her presence forever. Therefore she gave Norn a small credit-mark for not running true to the usual masculine form.

Uncle Charlie was replacing his rifle in the corner, when Norn came from the washroom.

"Sleep," said Norn laconically; and sought the room Uncle Charlie always reserved for him.

"And she never even thanked him," the landlord marveled aloud. "What kind o' wimmin are they raisin' these days?"

The menace of Uncle Charlie's rifle removed, Pete ran out to inspect his chief. He found Bundy on all fours, making feeble attempts to gain his feet.

Pete returned and reported Bundy's condition to Hardy who was fairly boiling over with rage.

"Bundy's through," rasped out the gambler. "Get him out of town, and look after things yourself. Don't let me see him or there'll be a funeral. How often have I told the—" and here Hardy affixed certain descriptions of Bundy's ancestors and general weaknesses— "to keep off the street and leave strangers alone."

But Hardy's rage was not caused by any high-flown desire to keep intact the peace of Hemper, but by the low-browed Bundy even daring to think of looking at the woman that he, Hardy, had selected for himself.

Pete hurriedly jerked the gang away from the games and the bar and drove them to the corral. There, with much grumbling and cursing, they saddled their horses. They rode over to Bundy who was now wandering about like a sick burro.

Pete reined in and surveyed the whipped man disgustedly.

"Norn certainly done a good job on you," he jeered. "You look like you'd been run through a stamp mill. Here, Jerry, you and Tom throw this mess on his hawse."

"He didn't fight me fair," Bundy suddenly began wailing, when the two men had heaved him into the saddle. "He hit me with a club."

Pete turned to Billy Snake who was still clawing at his burns.

"How about it, Billy?"

"No club," declared Billy, quite emphatically for him. "Hand dis way," and he pantomimed the action of striking with the fist, and grunted. "Bundy him cry like woman. Norn go way."

Pete laughed raucously, and gave Bundy a contemptuous cuff with his open hand, the while he flouted him.

"So you squealed, did you! I always thought you'd squeal. Well, you're through, and see that you keep your head shut."

Bundy did not resent Pete's open-handed smack, but lurched over the saddle horn, broken and cowed.

The gang lashed their former chief with contemptuous glances; and, on reaching the main camp at the foot of Witch-talk, proffered no aid to the beaten man. Let the squealer bind up his own wounds.

"Hand over that hundred," Pete demanded, as Bundy almost fell from his horse. "Hand it over, or I'll start in where Norn left off."

Bundy fumbled at his belt but was unable to get out the money. Pete roughly relieved him of the money-belt and milked it of five twenties, and threw it down at the vanquished one's feet.

CHAPTER IV

HARDY waited until Uncle Charlie had replaced the buffalo gun in its corner and resumed his throne on the porch. Slowly the gambler crossed the street, giving the landlord time to get his pipe going. The Hardy mission was one of peace. He knew that the girl's uncle held him responsible for the Bundy affair.

Hardy wagged his head apologetically, as he reached the porch steps.

"Charlie, I'm sorry about Bundy botherin' Miss Wayne. I had no idea the drunken fool would go so far."

Uncle Charlie began smoking in short, quick puffs, and Hardy, noting that sign of rising temper, hastily added—

"Nothin' like that will happen again."

The landlord arose, and menaced the gambler with his pipe, bellowing his answer in a voice that could be heard the length of the street.

"You're right it won't happen again. If it does, somebody gets a pill from my old Betsy he won't cough up. Chance Hardy, I've got along with you for years, but, when it comes to my folks, I won't stand no foolishness from you or no livin' man. 'Twas your whisky that made Bundy lay his filthy paws on my girl, and, if King Norn hadn't half-killed him, I'd a done the job myself. Don't curry me the wrong way, Chance. I'm old, but my finger's still steady on the trigger, and don't you forget it."

Hardy affected a contrite air, since he believed a state of war between Uncle Charlie and him meant the girl's disfavor. It wrenched him to mollify the landlord, for, to condemn Bundy was to praise Norn. And he was already secretly raging at Norn for having seized the leading part in the little play.

"I don't want any bad feelin's between us, Charlie. I sent the whole bunch out of town. After this my bartenders will cut 'em short."

The old man dropped back in his chair, and puffed moodily. After all no great harm had been done. Norn had given Bundy a lesson he would not soon forget, and Hardy had apologized. Still, the landlord cocked a suspicious eye at the gambler, sensing insincerity. But he finally waved his hand, as though putting aside something worthless, and rumbled—

"All right; let it pass."

The gambler forced a smile of relief, and returned abruptly to his saloon.

Dora, as was her custom with disagreeable memories, had erased that of the creature men called Bundy from her mind; but thoughts of Norn lingered, irritating her slightly. Surely she could not be expected to seek him, and, like some rural heroine in a comedy drama, thank him for having come to her rescue. She finally flatly refused to consider any phase of the affair; and ordering Maria to pull down the curtains, composed herself for a siesta.

In the evening, after supper, assisted by Maria, she arrayed herself in a white dress, and threw a gold bespangled scarf over her shoulders. Not that she had any intention of queening it on the porch, but it was pleasant out there, and Dickie liked to hear the men talk. Also, Dickie needed the fresh air.

The light from the big lamp in the office streamed out through the double window and softly illuminated the porch. There were big easy cane chairs, and inviting rockers. Uncle Charlie's chair reinforced with rawhide to hold his weight, was near the side of the porch that the old man might rest his slippered feet on the railing.

The gleam of the girl's white dress and the glitter of her spangled scarf were as mystic magnets to the men of Hemper, attracting them slowly but surely to the porch. They came with various flimsy little excuses that made Uncle Charlie, puffing contentedly in the shadow, smile knowingly.

But to the girl the men worshiping at the shrine of her beauty were merely a part of the atmosphere. She rarely spoke, seemingly occupied with some mysterious feminine introspection that made them more desirous of attracting her attention.

G. Holden Brown was ever in close attendance. The girl was aware of his presence as she might be aware of some handy automaton that opened doors for her and now and then brought her a glass of water.

Abner Twill, Hemper's lawyer, with whom Brown had held several mysterious conferences, now felt it necessary to eat supper regularly at the Hemper House. Prior to the arrival of the girl, Abner had limited himself to a Sunday dinner at the hotel, his finances being at such a low ebb as to hold him close to bacon and beans cooked in the little room back of his musty office. But now he was splurging magnificently, a covetous eye on the girl's money. A rich wife would lift him into certain political strata in Los Angeles where he might run for Congress.

The lawyer, as he eased his bony frame into a rocker, gave G. Holden Brown a little calculating glance. Brown was evidently deeply interested in Miss Wayne. For various reasons he must not annoy Brown. Still, he would hold his place in the circle. As a guest of the Hemper House he had a right to indulge in a little light comment.

Twill had a habit of punctuating his remarks with knuckle-cracking. He would pull his long, bony fingers until they popped like firecrackers. And, when he delivered a speech, his joint-popping took on the dignity of rifle fire.

"A wonderful beautiful evening, Miss Wayne!" he breathed.

Pop!

"How balmy the air!"

Pop! pop!

"Is not nature, Miss Wayne, glorious in her calmer moods?"

Pop, pop, pop!

That last series of pops was too much for Uncle Charlie.

"Suff'rin Moses, Ab," bawled the old man desperately, "leave your j'ints alone! Sounds like you was pullin' yourself apart. Makes me nervous. Stop it!"

That silenced Abner Twill. Unless he popped his finger joints, he could not talk; unless he talked, he merely occupied so much space.

Dickie stared fascinatedly at the funereal Twill.

"Let him crack his fingers, Uncle Charlie," begged the boy. "It's fun."

The lounging men laughed, and poor Twill placed his hands back of the chair out of the way of temptation.

G. Holden Brown launched an alto-voiced panegyric on nature's moods, winding up with some fragments of a lecture he had been forced to attend to please some San Francisco friends.

Feelingly he sighed—

"How often have I pondered upon the metamor——"

HE CHECKED himself. Cunningham, the Hemper doctor, had just arrived, and Brown was not sure but what the word he held by the tail was some medical term. So he released the struggling word, and went on smugly—

"At least we may be sure that to us the allness is almost entirely without loquac—loquacity——"

"I've got a mighty good loquat tree back of my shop," interrupted Bill Watson, the blacksmith, "if that's what you're talkin' about."

Doctor Cunningham tittered neatly. Old Bill had innocently tripped up this wordy stranger. Brown groped in a mental fog, and finally gave up the idea of awing the Hemperites with words, and thus attempting to prove to Miss Wayne that he was a man of her own caste.

The doctor ventured to relate some medical experiences, but no one evinced any interest. Apparently the girl was not aware of his existence, and the physician, noting certain hostile glances from some rugged males, decided to return to the companionship of the skeleton in his dreary office.

Having decided to call on Uncle Charlie's niece, the Reverend Nittin wrestled with himself in prayer. He would interest her in church work, and would refrain from any wicked personal feelings. She was beautiful beyond all power of words to express, and he must fortify himself with prayer ere he wandered within the range of temptation. He was encumbered with a peculiar egotism; he believed that temptation lurked in the highways to pounce upon the pure and good. Yes, he would call, and interest her in church work, and later, if she insisted, he might make her his wife. Her wealth would build a church, and rescue him from starvation.

And so the little sheep man wandered forth among the wolf and panther men.

Hardy had joined the worshipers on the porch, but had attempted no excuse. When the Reverend Nittin arrived with a murmured "Good evening," the Hardy brow darkened. He had thought of giving the little preacher some money to build a church, but now there would be none of his gold forthcoming. He moved into the light and stared malignantly at Nittin. Norn, refreshed by his afternoon sleep, sat in the shadowy corner of the porch farthest from the girl. He smiled at the effect of Hardy's malignant stare.

"I took the liberty of calling on you, Miss Wayne," bleated the minister faintly, striving to wrest his fascinated eyes from Hardy's hypnotic glare. "I feel that a great deal of good can be accomplished if——"

He seated himself gingerly.

Hardy hitched his chair closer to the minister, and his dark eyes took on an agate sheen.

"How are you this evening, Mr. Hardy?" baaed the minister, his hands fluttering.

"I'm well as usual," flung back Hardy, chill menace in his voice.

The minister with a desperate effort, wrenched his gaze from the gambler's gleaming eyes, and faced the girl.

"I trust, Sister Wayne——"

At this point, Dickie arose from his position at his sister's feet, and faced the minister truculently.

"She's not your sister," he asserted shrilly. "She's my sister, and don't you call her your sister."

The boy seated himself on the arm of his sister's chair, and placed a jealous arm around her neck.

The Reverend Nittin gasped, but managed to bleat—

"No, no, my little man, I did not mean she was my sister, except, in the sweetness of our mutual——"

"Say, Miss Wayne," blurted out the blacksmith, "if that saddle hawse you're figgerin' on buyin' needs shoein', bring him down and I'll fit him up right."

"I believe the man who is to have the care of the horse, will attend to that," came the cool reply.

The blacksmith's turgid mind had labored long on the proposition of shoeing her horse. Blacksmithing was all he knew. If she wasn't interested in horse-shoeing, the trail to her favor was closed to him. Heavily he arose, and clumped away.

Nittin's pallid soul shriveled under the gambler's burning gaze. He made a pitiful attempt to give his call the semblance of sanity, but the panic of a frightened fawn hurried his feet, as he murmured to Dora, "So pleased to have met you," and fairly skipped off the porch.

A huge, bearded prospecter wandered in, saw the girl, and stopped short. Then he saw Norn in the shadow, and noted Hardy's questioning, hostile stare.

"Evenin', Hank," greeted Uncle Charlie. "Set down. My niece, Miss Wayne."

The huge man removed his dusty hat, and gulped—

"Pleased to meet you."

He seated himself carefully, and regarded the girl blandly.

Oh, the power of woman to stir the imagination! Hank, under the spell of her beauty, recounted tales of lost mines, and desperate days. He told of lurching across treeless hells, and the visions that then came to him of limpid pools, and cool streams gurgling among the grasses. He made gestures that any orator might envy, and his deep voice took on the melody of a chant as he recited his "Odyssey."

Dickie listened open-mouthed, and the girl smiled at the lad's interest.

Hank suddenly realized that he was merely amusing the boy. His egotism collapsed. This was no place for him, a broken-down prospector who reeked of greasewood smoke and burro-sweat.

He, too, arose heavily.

"Thank him," Dora whispered to Dickie, "for telling you so many interesting stories."

The big man gulped at Dickie's "Thank you, Mr. Hank," gave the girl a hopeless look, and stumbled into the darkness.

Jed Holly, a smart deputy sheriff under the thumb of Hardy, started to relate some deeds of heroism, giving himself a careless air. But the Hardy glare made him falter, and Uncle Charlie's thundering laugh blotted him out completely.

"To hear you talk, Jed," boomed the merciless old man, "a man'd think you had a private buryin'-ground."

"Jed likes to see his voice bounce," sneered Hardy.

Muttering vaguely, the deputy retreated from the ever-narrowing circle.

ONE of Norn's cowboys, who had had several drinks of cheering and ego-inflating liquor caught the gleam of the girl's white dress, and paused in front of the hotel, entranced by the beauty of her face. He did not see Norn in the shadowy corner. With chaps flapping, spurs jingling, and six-shooter dangling, he strode up on the porch.

"How's old Uncle Charlie?" he cried boisterously.

"Dan!"

The cowboy whirled as though a gun had been fired at him.

"Oh, it's you," he bleated foolishly, as he recognized Norn.

"You're drunk," said Norn in a low voice. "Move along."

The cowboy slunk away.

"You keep your riders well in hand, King," complimented Uncle Charlie.

Then John Meeker, the jolly, rotund keeper of the general store, joined the circle on the porch. He had hurried to his self-appointed tryst. The light through the office window gleamed upon his head, as innocent of hair as the ivory handle of Norn's six-shooter.

Uncle Charlie could not resist the temptation.

"Jumpin' bull-frogs, but you're gettin' balder every minute, Meeker!"

The old man ran his fingers through his own thick gray thatch, and chuckled.

Now the storekeeper was most sensitive concerning the nudity of his dome. For him Uncle Charlie's cruel remark carried little poisoned insinuations that he was passé and had no place among young and vigorous men worshiping at the shrine of beauty. And he had put on a clean collar and sprayed himself liberally with some of his best perfume.

Uncle Charlie sniffed.

"And you're all perfumed up, too! What's this world a-comin' to?"

The old man emitted a bellow of wild laughter. Even the girl smiled. Hardy, too, relaxed his rather tense pose, and gazed at the storekeeper with amused, half-closed eyes.

Meeker weakly attempted jocularity, but displayed a pitiful lack of his wonted snap. Perhaps, Hemper was right. He was old—fifty-two last Fall.

But he managed to mumble to Uncle Charlie—

"I just dropped down to tell you that I got them canned pears you was askin' for the other day."

Then he wandered off the porch and paused irresolutely on the sidewalk.

"Better come back and get your hat," Uncle Charlie called.

Meeker started as from a trance, then returned and secured his hat.

"What's ailin' you, John!" the landlord twitted. "All het up and excited, and forgettin' your hat. Without a hat—why, you're plum' naked."

The little man's only thought now was to escape. Wildly he looked back as he started down the steps, missed his footing, and fell, floundering about on the sidewalk.

Dickie, with the thoughtlessness of the very young, laughed shrilly. Uncle Charlie made no effort to restrain his mirth.

The storekeeper was badly bruised. Norn leaped down and helped him to his feet. In his flounderings Meeker had shed some toilet articles, a pocket comb, a toothbrush, a mirror, as well as sundry keys, pencils and other articles necessary to a man of his trade-rat habits. These, Norn gathered up and stuck in the pockets of the bewildered man. Then, aiming him in the desired direction, he gave the little man a gentle shove. Meeker zigzagged toward his store with the halting steps of a sleepwalker.

Gritting his teeth on a persistent grin, Norn returned to his dark corner.

Mrs. Milliken, the nurse, came and bundled Dickie off to bed.

Presently Uncle Charlie yawned portentously, and retired, leaving the big office lamp burning for the benefit of those he called "the night owls."

The girl moved her chair over to the rail, and looked out through the cottonwoods into the mysterious country beyond.

Norn saw a prospector across the street whom he had grub-staked, and walked over to chat with him.

Brown, the persistent, moved his chair to a position opposite the girl, and settled down for a cosy tête-à-tête.

The girl turned her head with a little gesture of weariness.

Brown began babbling of riding horses and of mountain scenery. The girl raised a silencing hand.

"I prefer to be alone," she said.

There was no acidity in her tones, just weariness. She was tired of the G. Holden Browns; she had known droves of them.

"But I assure you, Miss Wayne——"

The girl arose and walked away from him, and off the porch. Brown looked after her, half-minded to follow, but Hardy's chill voice knifed that thought.

"Does it take a piece of lead before you know you're not wanted?"

Brown's reply made Hardy stare at him in wonderment. What queer words the fat man released!

"Your insinuations are uncalled for," said Brown loftily.

Though Brown had seen Uncle Charlie in action, and had noted the swift punishment of Bundy, his hot-house egotism blinded him to the fact that he was not in a country, policed and guarded, where a man might make cutting remarks and escape physical injury. He had come from the East as the representative of a well-organized band of land-sharks who regarded California, with its confusion in land and water titles, a rich field for their questionable operations. He believed that a man could do anything so long as he kept within the law. His mind was not constructed for noting primitive facts. The law would always protect him. He did not know that his reply to the gambler's question was like the prattle of a child playing with a rattlesnake.

"I don't get your line of talk," Hardy said, after darkly studying the fat man for several moments. "But I wouldn't make any false moves around this camp, if I was you. Somebody might open you."

The man was getting personal again, thought Brown, happily unaware that the Hardy expression, "Somebody might open you" meant quick, merciless knife-work. He decided not to bandy words with a low gambler; and marched swiftly past Hardy, and up to his room.

"Queer bird," mused the gambler aloud. Then to Twill—"What you and the fat slug so thick about?"

"He's interested in the resources of the country," Twill replied unctuously, for he feared Hardy.

"Uh, huh," muttered the gambler.

* * *

TWILL was thankful when the girl returned to her chair by the porch rail and freed him from the gambler's somber, questioning gaze. The lawyer slipped up to Brown's room, having some unfinished business with that gentleman.

Brown opened the door and yawned in the lawyer's face.

"I thought we'd better go over that matter more carefully," said Twill, with a death's-head smirk, and edging past Brown into the room.

He popped a finger to get into action.

"Norn has never thought it necessary to file on the water. Besides, as I've told you, the stream heads beyond the northern boundaries of the old Mexican grant secured by Norn's father."

"That's the one point that bothers me," Brown admitted. "What maps I've had access to show the water heading outside the grant. But there has been no Government survey of that country. The old Mexican grant boundaries were designated by natural objects, hills and such things, and are very unsatisfactory from a legal standpoint. You say you have been over the Norn ranch, and know the boundaries?"

"Yes, yes," lied the lawyer glibly, his mind intent on the fee Brown had promised.

He was in desperate need of money, and was as devoid of conscience as a famished dog.

"Well," Brown decided, "I'll see for myself. What do you suppose Norn will do when he finds I have secured control of the water?"

Twill licked his lips nervously, and attacked the main issue.

"I have had some financial difficulties," he nimbly sidestepped. "Could you see your way clear to advance me, say, a hundred dollars?"

Following Twill's departure, Hardy decided to show his hand. He seated himself on the rail near the girl, and began:

"Miss Dora, I'm used to speakin' my mind." The girl stirred uneasily. "I'm not a poor man. I may not have as much money as some men, but I've plenty." Then, in his ignorance of the type of woman he was addressing, he added impressively, "And I'd marry you."

Her reply held the tinkle of steel on ice.

"You honor me. I infer that you do not usually make such a generous offer. But I have no interest in you or your affairs, Mr. Hardy."

She arose, and a little flicker of light from the lamp in the office brought out the carven beauty of her face. A faint glimpse of futility came to the dark-faced gambler, some realization that she was as far above him as heaven itself.

As she turned to go, she glanced back at him impersonally.

It came to Hardy that he was only one of the many who had shattered their hopes on the rock of her indifference. He wanted to strangle her, but her cool, impersonal gaze held him motionless. He watched her enter the office, and then fled, cursing madly.

Returning to the plotters up-stairs. Twill's request for cash made Brown wince. The lawyer had been of considerable value to him, but there was a predatory gleam in the funereal one's eye that the fat man did not like. He put him off with many questions, but insistently the lawyer returned to the main issue.

"A hundred dollars is most necessary to my welfare at this time," was the burden of the lawyer's refrain.

Finally the land-shark sighed resignedly, and removed a fat billbook from his coat hanging on the bedpost. He counted out the money and passed the bills to the lawyer. Then he yawned meaningly.

Twill opened the door and stood there for a moment. There was a tiny lamp burning in the hall, but the lawyer failed to see the dark, little figure approaching him. Maria saw the lawyer in the doorway and paused back of him in the shadow. She was not eavesdropping; it was just her shy Indian way. The man would go in a moment, and then she would slip down to the cabin back of the kitchen to say good-night to her mother before returning to her little room adjoining the bedroom of her mistress.

"Norn hasn't a shadow of a legal right to the water," asseverated the lawyer, having in mind the balance of his fee.

Maria, when she heard the name of the man she adored, became tense and alert. She did not gather the full import of Twill's words, but she felt intuitively that the man in the doorway meant no good toward the man who had brought her the mocking-bird.

Brown grunted a sleepy "Good-night." Twill slipped stealthily down the hall, passing Dora on the stairway.

NORN had returned to the porch, and, as the lawyer shambled past him, he groped for the cause of Twill's nocturnal habits. What had the lawyer been doing up-stairs?

Then from the end of the porch a soft voice hailed him. He smiled as the light fell on the brown, earnest face of Maria.

He sauntered over to her.

"Well, little brown one, what can I do for you?"

"Me come tell you Twill him talk wiz big fat man in room. Twill him say—" and she parroted the lawyer's words—"'Norn hasn't shadow legal right to water.' Me come down fast back stairs." Then in Spanish, "The words were not good words."

She smiled up at him adoringly. Norn seated himself on the rail and put his arm about the girl's shoulder. He meant nothing by the caress other than a simple appreciation of the loyalty of a child. She was his friend.

As Dora entered her room, she missed her scarf, and called Maria. Meeting with no response, she decided to return to the porch; doubtless she had dropped the scarf there. She was not sleepy, and was half-inclined to take another stroll.

Softly she opened the office door and glided out on the porch. She halted abruptly, as she recognized Norn and Maria, and noted the position of his arm and the Indian girl's adoration. Then, as she realized that it hurt her strangely to see his arm about the girl, she fled to the bleak heights of Puritanism. Norn, the wealthy cattleman, was playing with a simple Indian girl. The man was a beast —and worse, since he knew the tenets of decent society.

Maria was looking up in the face of the pondering man with intense and worshipful earnestness.

"I'll never forget what you have done for me, Maria," he said slowly.

Dora's heart contracted in a spasm of pain—pain for the trusting Indian maid.

But he would forget what the girl had done for him; a man always forgets.

Then Maria lowered her eyes and met the cold, accusing gaze of her mistress. She did not know that that cold, accusing gaze was for Norn, and she fled precipitately to her parents' cabin, not daring to return to her room, dreading the mysterious anger of the beautiful white woman.

"Pardon me for interrupting, but I dropped my scarf——"

Norn faced her puzzedly. What cause had she to address him with such accentuated hauteur?

He found the scarf and gave it to her. She thanked him coldly.

"Amusing yourself with a simple child," she heard herself say, "is hardly the part of a man who pretends chivalry——"

Norn raised his hand in a sharp, quick gesture, and for the life of her she could not go on. Neither could she meet his searching gaze. She had expected to see him cower before the flame of her sarcasm; instead, he radiated an anger that appalled her.

"Look at me!"

His tone was like the whisper of a swift sword.

Slowly she raised her eyes. The man's face was granite; in his eyes were dancing points of light; his lips were thin-drawn, and about the nostrils were shadows that flowed up to merge with the shadows beneath the eyes, giving his face the look of a portrait done boldly in black and white.

Fear came to her; not physical fear, but the keen spiritual fear that leaves the soul quaking with dread.

What had she said? Oh, yes, the man was guilty of an offense against the rules of decent society.

Norn whirled abruptly and strode into the darkness.

She sank into a chair, struggling to retain her foothold on the peak of Puritanism. She would rescue Maria, lift her up tenderly from the depths. . . But the man's eyes—those frank, terrible eyes? Perhaps he wasn't guilty; that tiny thought gave her an unreasonable joy. Then back to the bleak heights; he was guilty. Had he not voiced the ancient lying litany, "I'll never forget?"

Wearily she returned to her room, sighing under an imagined burden of responsibility. She would rescue Maria, the poor, blind, foolish child; and treat the man with silent contempt. Yet, she was forced to admit, it would be difficult to treat with silent contempt a man who steadfastly refrained from entering the trap of words. To be treated with silent contempt, a man must intrude. She could not recall the slightest intrusion on Norn's part. Then she realized that she was not thinking clearly, that one set of vague thoughts were battling another set equally vague, and that she was very sleepy.

An hour later, Norn entered his room, and drew off his boots. He was calm now, recognizing that his position was impregnable. She had judged him who was guiltless, on flimsy circumstantial evidence. In time she would discover the wrong she had done him, and, being what she was, would have to come to him to right that wrong. That would mean no small struggle on her part, and in the meantime she would be thinking of him. He would make no move toward her, speak no word. He would hold himself aloof, confining himself to action in the man-life.

There was G. Holden Brown with his water-grabbing scheme. Well, Brown knew something of the value of water, but his education in that line was incomplete. It might be well to add to the fat man's knowledge a more intimate understanding of the preciousness of the fluid. He smiled peacefully as he fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

BUNDY'S camp at the foot of Witch-talk was sheltered from the west wind that frequently howled through the pass, and was an eye-gladdening spot to men coming in from the desert wastes. At the head of the cañon, at the mouth of which was the camp, a waterfall effectually barred the way. The stream ended in a pool near the camp. About the pool wild grass grew luxuriantly and alder trees offered shade and shelter.

The gang was full-fed, having just gorged on roast mountain sheep flavored with bacon. They were smoking and lounging about the fire. Bundy lowered in the shadow, sore in heart and body.

While they were eating, the members of the gang had given Bundy a short rest from their cruel gibes concerning his lady-killing powers and his marvelous fighting ability.

But now, as they lounged about the fire, they resumed their prodding of their ex-chief, for Pete had not omitted informing them that Hardy had told him to "look after things."

"Bundy overlooked a bet," one declared, fishing for a laugh. "He's got a good pair of legs, and should have let Norn take after him. Then all he'd had to do was to run Norn to death."

Another suggested that Bundy should have dug a hole and "pulled the hole in after him," and thus compelled Norn to 'work himself to death diggin' him out."

"Wonder what he was lookin' for when you found him, Pete?" a hawk-nosed humorist asked, innocently. "You said he was down on all fours lookin' around for something."

"Tryin' to find his courage——"

"Here, here," reproved Pete, now realizing that there was nothing to be gained by rubbing salt into the wounds of Bundy. "Let up. Bundy's not the only one that lost out with a girl."

"Yes, that's right," agreed the hawk-nosed humorist. "Billy there, got a pan of dish-water and a dose of hot grease for his trouble."

Pete laughed. The Indian was of little or no value. He now saw it would be poor policy to antagonize Bundy to the extent of forcing him out of the gang. He half-regretted that he had not been more diplomatic in his treatment of the fallen chief. Therefore his attempt to divert the fire of caustic comment to the Indian.

He proceeded to encourage them in the banter of Billy Snake who, as he became the target for their gibes, drew back sullenly into the darkness.

"Yes," he drawled, "Billy sure has hard luck winnin' a squaw. He knows that an Injun who can't get a squaw is no man a-tall."

He finished with a loud, raucous laugh.

The hawk-nosed humorist twisted around lazily, and taunted:

"Hey, Billy, you'll be an old man before you get a squaw. What's the matter with you—no good? Guess old Chang's got you scared out."

Their words bit deep into the savage heart of Billy Snake. So they thought he was not a man because he couldn't get a squaw. And the yellow man had thrown hot grease on him as a squaw throws rubbish on an intruding dog. Aye, and the squaw had dishonored him with filthy water. Well, he would prove to them all that he was a warrior—a man who could get a squaw.

Discouraged by the Indian's silence, the gang left off chaffing him, and returned to the subject of Bundy's various weaknesses, taunting him, despite Pete's grumbled objections, until they rolled up in their blankets.

When the last man was asleep, including the bruised and battered Bundy who groaned even in slumber, the Indian examined his rifle and slipped from the camp. He ran as swiftly as a coyote, and three hours before dawn stood among the cottonwoods near the Hemper House. Then, like a shadow he glided across the yard, and paused near the door of the Indians' cabin, listening intently. Softly he opened the door. The cage that held Maria's mocking bird hung near the window. Billy Snake fumbled with the tiny door of the cage. Presently he wormed in a slim hand, round the bird and squeezed its life out.

His next move was to clutch the throat of Maria, lest, as she awoke, her screams rouse the white men. The girl opened her eyes as the lean fingers dug into her soft neck. Her forlorn sob was cut short by the tightening of the implacable fingers.

"Silence!" hissed the Indian in Spanish. "The Snake hath come for thee!"

He punched her with his rifle, threatening her with death if she did not instantly obey his orders. She had lain down fully dressed, with the exception of her shoes; and now sat up on the edge of the bed, shivering with nameless terror. Billy stooped and felt around for her shoes, and placed them in her trembling hands. He jammed the rifle-barrel against her breast. She drew on her shoes, choking back the sobs that reached her.

Billy Snake seized the girl's arm, and dragged her to the door. At that moment Maria's father awoke and gave a startled yell which roused the mother who immediately began screeching. The desperate savage dragged the girl back with him, and with venomous threats of death silenced the old Indians to quaking hummocks of flesh beneath the bed covers.

Then, jerking the girl through the doorway, he punched her viciously with his rifle, and drove her ahead of him into the night.

The Indian and his captive were far beyond the precints of Hemper, ere Maria's father ventured to pull back the covers from his face. The fat, old Kawia was not made of warrior stuff, being reduced by the missions and civilization to a soft blubber that dreaded the hiss of steel or the whine of lead. Sucking in his breath noisily, he slowly turned his head, and peered dreadfully about the cabin. Then he touched his mammoth squaw who lay in a dumb, sweating trance of fear.

"Snake has taken our child," he bubbled in Kawia.

The squaw sprang from the bed with startling swiftness and began running wildly about the room, screeching and wailing. The old Indian added his vocal efforts to those of the distracted mother, and the little cabin became a bedlam of yelps, howls and screeches.

Norn, ever a light sleeper, awoke, listened for a moment to the caterwauling issuing from the cabin, and dressed hurriedly. He threw up the window which overlooked the roof of the kitchen, crawled through, slipped down the roof and dropped to the ground.

Out of the various yelps and screeches emitted by the frantic Indians, Norn managed to gather that Billy Snake had abducted Maria. He wasted no time in soothing the distracted parents, but raced to the stable, saddled his horse, made sure his arms and ammunition were in fit condition, and racked warily into the desert.

Uncle Charlie was aroused by the clamor of the Indians, and managed to calm Maria's father sufficiently to get the facts. He noted the lifeless mocking bird, and his old mouth twisted wickedly.

"An Injun trick," he muttered; and returned to the hotel to array himself for the trail.

DORA had been awakened by the outcries of the Indians, but Dickie slept through it all. She put on a robe, and hurried down-stairs where she met her uncle.

"Billy Snake, that Piute that Chang throwed the grease on, has stole Maria," the old man yelled, before she could question him. "Killed her mocker, too, the red hound!"

"Why, what does it mean?" she quavered.

"It means," roared the old man impatiently, as he clawed about for his shoes, "that Maria is started on the first lap of the trail to hell."

"What is to be done?" she gasped.

"Done?" grunted Uncle Charlie, tugging at his shoes. "Kill the Injun or get him, and hang him." Then he cursed viciously as a shoe lace broke.

"Why, uncle!" gasped the shocked girl.

"'Why, uncle,' ——," bawled the now frantic old man. "Is this a time for a niece of mine to be namby-pamby? Gawd help you, girl, with your pin-headed idees! Go get my rifle. Limpin' sufferin' Judas, where in the good dangnation did I put them six-shooter shells!"

Dora found herself dragging the heavy rifle from its corner. She returned to her uncle, humble, and wanting to be of service. He was going forth to trail down a desperate savage.

"Norn's already gone," fumed the old man, struggling with a refractory belt. "Norn'll get that Injun if he's to be got. Maria has been under that boy's wing since she was a baby. Reg'ler big brother to her—figgerin' on sendin' her East to school. Now, give me that gun."

G. Holden Brown came to the foot of the stairs.

"Hey, you Brown," yelled Uncle Charlie, as he came from his room in full wargear, "you'd better come to the hardware store with me and get a rifle. Billy Snake's stole Maria, and we'll need plenty of men."

"Well, really, Mr. Hemper, such work——"

"All right; if your feet are cold," Uncle Charlie cut in wickedly, "stay in bed and keep 'em warm."

The old warrior waddled forth to gather up a posse.

Brown rolled into bed, and tucked the covers about him snugly. The abduction of an Indian squaw was nothing to him. Indians were mere animals anyway. Then he remembered that he had not locked his door. He arose, lighted the lamp, and fumbled for the key. It came to him that the guest rooms of the Hemper House were destitute of keys, and he placed a chair against the door. Not that he was fearful, oh, no! He simply felt that doors were made to be locked.

Gloomy specters arose in the mind of Dora to point accusing fingers at her cringing Puritanism, and to mock the narrow-mindedness that had hastened her sarcastic and unsubstantiated condemnation of Norn. Now, she knew the man was guiltless, being merely a friend and protector of the Indian girl. Even now he was risking his life to save the little brown maid. Then, the specters gibbered, she was largely responsible for Maria's plight. Her accusing look, meant for Norn, had frightened the shy Maria into sleeping in the cabin instead of seeking her little room where she would have been beyond the reach of the savage.

What must Norn now think of her? She, who had looked out calmly on the world of men, noting impersonally their struttings, their tricks, their solemn buffoonery, had proved to be without wisdom, consideration, or even that fine intuition supposed to be woman's peculiar quality.

There was only one path to follow, the way of humbleness. She would, at the first opportunity, explain all to him, leaving nothing unsaid, however much it hurt her pride or thorned her woman's dignity.

As for Maria, she would pray for her—what else was there to do? And, if—what concentrated sorrow and suffering that little word held—if Norn rescued the child, she, Dora Wayne, would vie with him in making smooth the path of Maria. The Indian girl would be educated and given every advantage.

Then, helplessly, she contemplated the fact that all her humbleness, all her good resolves were due to the staggering blow her faulty judgment had received. She was not naturally considerate or good. Mercilessly she lashed herself. She had only a superficial knowledge of life. She had been a snob condemning snobs, an egotist condemning egotists. Oh, what must Norn, the cold-eyed and silent man, think of her!

She found that she could not sleep, so she woke Dickie, and told him of the abduction of Maria.

"I wish I were a man—I just wish I were," he whimpered, wagging his head savagely. "I'd take a gun, and bring Maria back to you. I bet Mr. Norn will make that old Indian feel sorry. Did Uncle Charlie go, too?"

"Yes, dear."

"And Mr. Brown?"

"No, laddie; Mr. Brown was afraid."

"Yes," sneered Dickie, the courageous, "he's too fat."

The girl smiled wanly, thankful for the dauntless soul in Dickie's weak little body.

"Mr. Norn will make that old Indian feel sorry," Dickie repeated solemnly.

Norn, thought the girl, always Norn. She bowed humbly before the god of action. Norn did not talk; he acted. All thought, all word juggling, all opinion-launching, were as so much gray dust before vibrant, glowing action. King Norn was action personified. Even Dickie could see that. The man was ever in motion, not to be halted, not to be stayed. This, to her, seemed touched with dim shadow. Suppose some woman should love him, could she—could she hold him?

Suddenly she threw her arms about the wondering Dickie, and hugged him close. The lad made a clumsy effort to soothe her.

"Don't worry, sweet little sister," he comforted, smoothing her hair, "Mr. Norn will bring Maria back to you."

And so they waited for the dawn.

NORN knew that Billy Snake would not take Maria to any resort of the Bundy gang. An Indian who steals a woman puts not his trust in white men.

The Indian might hold to the Witch-talk side of the pass, and venture across the basin to the desert hills; or he might round the shoulder of Rain-maker, and cross to the hills in the vicinity of his—Norn's—ranch.

Norn decided to keep to the Witch-talk side until he came to the jutting crags that protected the Bundy camp. Reaching the crags, he would then ride back toward his ranch. By that time it would be light enough for trailing. Meanwhile, he must face the chance of a shot from Billy Snake.

Dawn found him swinging back toward his ranch, convinced that the Indian had kept to the Rain-maker side of the basin. He struck the trail where Maria and the Indian had crossed the ranch road and headed scross the basin toward Twenty-eight Palms, a water-hole about four miles from the desert hills. He dismounted, and closely examined the tracks. Maria was ahead; Billy was evidently driving her. Her tracks were little troughs in the sand, indicating fatigue. The Indian's tracks were clean-cut; he was not beginning to tire, and was yet able to travel many long, hot miles.

The rancher followed the trail with great caution; he knew the Indian trick of doubling back to ambush a pursuer.

At Twenty-eight Palms he found some remnants of rabbit fur and skin. The Indian, to save ammunition, had clubbed a cottontail and eaten it raw. Billy Snake had one meal the better of it, but that did not matter.

Norn resolved to turn his horse loose. Billy was now probably snugly ensconced in some safe look-out in the hills, some point of vantage from which he would be able to sight the pinto horse at a sufficient distance to cover trail or plan ambush. True, the Indian could see a man on foot, but not at the distance he could discern the horse. The pinto could find grass and water near the palms. Lastly, a horse was practically useless in following a man on foot through the desert hills.

As Norn followed the trail toward the [illegible], the country became more desolate. Great washes, strewn with boulders, debouched from the hills. Here and there barrel cactuses lifted hairy shapes that seemed instinct with hideous intelligence. Between the washes swarmed the cholla, green and flourishing, drawing from some mysterious source a vitality that mocked the less-favored growths, dead and withered in that sun-baked, waterless land.

The trail of Billy Snake led into one of the gloomy cañons that extended rib-wise from the back of the desert range that gradually rose to merge with Rain-maker.

Norn paused and considered the ways of Indians. Would Billy follow the cañon he had entered and cross the back of the range, or would he cross over to the cañon on the south? Certainly the Indian would not turn toward Rain-maker. Had he intended to hide in the fastnesses of the timbered mountain, the Indian would have headed straight toward the peak. He concluded that Billy Snake would do the most baffling thing: follow the cañon for a short distance, then turn up a rocky tributary, and cross over to an equally rocky tributary to the cañon on the south.

The rancher resolved to enter the south cañon, and keep close to the north wall. If Billy had not crossed over, he would follow the cañon up to the back of the range, and, turning north, strike the Indian's trail.

Billy had done what Norn had surmised. The Indian had turned south up a tributary cañon, stepping carefully from boulder to boulder, forcing the girl to imitate his trail-trickery. As they reached the head of the tributary, Billy halted and peered over a shrub at the desert basin below him. He hissed a sibilant warning to the girl as he glimpsed a man approaching the mouth of the big cañon to the south.

Long he studied the approaching figure, noting a certain familiarity in the carriage and dress. Then, as the man entered the cañon, the Indian recognized him. So the mocking-bird-giver thought to wrest the woman from him. Billy's lips drew back from his white teeth. Now was his opportunity to count, as was the custom of his fathers, a mighty *coup*. He had stolen a woman from a hostile camp; a deed which the boldest warrior might recount with pride. Now he would kill a white man, and give to himself the honors of a chief.

"Norn," he mocked his victim, "seeks the Mocking Bird that she may sing for him, but, lo"—and he patted his rifle—"this shall sing him to sleep."

The girl gave him a look of deathless hate, and then her tear-streaked face grew dull, void alike of hope or despair.

As Norn disappeared in the mouth of the cañon, Billy Snake punched the girl with his rifle. Her skirt was in rags where it had caught on cactus and mesquite; her back was a mass of bruises where he had punched her with his rifle; her waist was torn from her shoulders, and there were marks as of claws on her breasts. She had passed through enough torture to kill a white woman; yet, despoiled, bruised and bloody, and hopeless, she plodded on.

The floods had wedged in several huge boulders at the mouth of the tributary cañon where Billy hoped to ambush Norn. The main cañon, smooth-walled, turned some twenty paces beyond the boulder-clogged mouth of the tributary. The white man for that distance would be at a distinct disadvantage.

The Indian, traveling a more direct route than Norn, reached the mouth of the tributary several minutes before the white man, hugging the north wall, came to the abrupt turn. Here, Norn halted, recognizing the turn as an ideal place for an ambush. Yet he must go forward. Crouching low, his rifle at the ready, he leaped around the turn.

At that instant, Maria, calling on the last shred of her strength, sprang over the boulders, and threw herself toward the white man, screaming:

"Norn! Norn! Norn!"

Billy Snake, in a mad frenzy, raised up and fired from the hip at the girl. Even as she slumped, Norn's rifle mingled its withering crack with the bellow of Billy's old Springfield, and, before the echoes died, the Indian fell, his head in plain sight of the white man.

Norn leaped over the boulders to make sure the Indian was not shamming death, and then sprang back to Maria.

She was alive but she would soon tread the way of souls. Norn lifted her up, resting her head against his knee. He did not examine the wound; her face told him she was doomed.

The Mocking Bird looked up into the face of the man she had loved ever since she was a solemn-eyed baby.

"Aye," she sighed in Spanish, "thou thought to save me, yet soon shall the Mocking Bird fly far away from thee."

He patted her cheek reassuringly.

"No, no, little one. Thou hast but a scratch or two. Soon Norn will carry thee back to the *madre* who awaits thee. Are not the arms of Norn strong arms?"

His heart sank as his hand came in contact with her warm, welling blood.

Though the shadow of death was beginning to dull her face, she yearned up to him, whispering:

"The Beautiful White One was angry with Maria—" She moaned a little. Then: "Wilt thou not tell me—thou lovest me—thou grand man, Norn? Wilt thou not kiss me?"

NORN looked down in the face of the dying girl, and read therein the age-old yearn of the loving woman. He had been blind to the flight of time, deeming her a child who would never become a woman. Why should he not now tell her he loved her, which in truth he did, though not in the way her woman's soul desired.

So he pressed his lips to hers, murmuring endearments, saying over and over again—

"Norn loves thee, Little Brown One."

She strained up for a last look at his face, and saw his eyes bright with tears. Love transfigured her face; he was mourning for her.

Then the shadow crept over her face, she breathed a faint "*Adios*," her head drooped, and she was gone.

Norn eased back the bruised little body, and stood for a time, a motionless, somber, lonely figure.

There was only one thing to do—carry that which once had been the Mocking Bird back to Twenty-eight Palms. He could leave Billy to the coyotes, but not Little Brown One. There was no place in that cañon where the little form would be safe from the desert scavengers.

Tenderly he raised the dead girl to his shoulder, and with considerable effort picked up his rifle.

It was a ghastly journey, straining his strength to the utmost. He was soon forced to cache his rifle and belt. With the burden on his shoulder, the cactus and boulders, the treacherous rat holes, all seemed leagued against him. He rested frequently, talking to the dead girl, assuring that which had once smiled shyly at him that he would somehow overcome all obstacles.

When he reached Twenty-eight Palms, he was near the limit of his desert-seasoned strength. He eased his burden to the ground. The last lap of the journey had been made without rest, and the engine of his being was pounding furiously.

Exhausted, he sprawled out on his back, and lay motionless for a full hour.

The sunset was now flaming in the pass: fiery crimson bars across a sky of smoky purple.

The rancher arose, and prepared a bed of palm leaves for the dead girl, and drew off his shirt to cover the vacuous face.

Again he sprawled out. He would sleep for a few hours, and then, on the back of his faithful pinto, carry Maria home.

A posse, headed by Uncle Charlie, rode up to the Palms shortly before midnight. They had combed the Witch-talk side of the basin, and had come to Twenty-eight Palms, planning to make that point a base camp.

Norn was awakened by the scraping of mesquite against boots and stirrups, and the voices of the rather incautious manhunters. He was on his feet as they rode beneath the palms.

There was a pallid half-moon, and Uncle Charlie's searching gaze fell on the form resting on the palm-leaf bed.

"The boy saved her," the old man shouted jubilantly. "She's all safe and sound. There she is—asleep!"

"Yes," said Norn sadly, "she's asleep—forever."

The men hurriedly dismounted, and gathered closely around Norn. Bitter oaths and furious exclamations broke from the listeners as he reported the bald facts of the affair in the cañon.

"Well," said Uncle Charlie, as Norn concluded, "there's nothin' left for us to do but take Maria home. Jack, you'd better get King's rifle and belt. We won't wait for you."

At dawn the posse rode into Hemper. Maria's father and mother were waiting in front of the hotel to receive them.

As the mother saw the blanket-shrouded shape in the arms of one of the horsemen, she slumped to the ground, and lifted the mourning wail; fat, pathetically ugly, but, nevertheless, a heart-broken mother.

The father stolidly received the body of his daughter, and carried it into the cabin.

Dora and Dickie were on the porch, sorrowful spectators of the last act of the tragedy.

Uncle Charlie hurriedly gave Dora the particulars of Norn's vain attempt to rescue Maria.

The girl's eyes filled with tears as the old man told of the tortures inflicted on the Indian girl and of her final sacrifice.

As Uncle Charlie concluded the account, Norn, who had been assisting Maria's mother back to the cabin, came up. Dora, tears gemming her dark lashes, made an impulsive move toward him, contrite words struggling to her trembling lips. But the man merely lifted his hat, flashed her a cold disconcerting glance, and passed into the office and up to his room.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE days following the funeral of Maria, Dora saw Norn frequently, but she was unable to summon sufficient strength to penetrate his reserve. Had he given her the opportunity demanded by her training and pride, she would have humbly asked his forgiveness for her Puritanical outburst. But the man was always passing to and fro swiftly. She gave him many opportunities to approach her, and even resorted to the ancient artifice of dropping her handkerchief, but to no avail. Norn merely recovered the handkerchief for her, and passed on swiftly.

She saw him talking with men here and there; she saw him emerge from the barbershop, freshly shaven and shorn; she saw him laughing at some story a grinning desert-rat related; but, never once did he turn his eyes toward her.

Dickie, however, experienced no difficulty in halting Norn and worming from him an invitation to visit the ranch in the lap of Rain-maker. It seemed that any one but she could attract and hold his attention. Even Brown was able to talk with the restless man, and receive an invitation to "look over the ranch."

She saw Dickie's face grow cloudy with disappointment as Brown hurried into the hotel to prepare for the trip.

Then she heard Norn comforting the boy with—

"You can go with me later—probably next week."

Despite her blind struggles against it, she was conscious of a growing admiration for the man's indifference. She was perfectly aware of the fact that men frequently affected indifference to attract feminine attention, but this man was not acting. She had falsely accused him, and he had risked his life in a vain attempt to save the Indian girl she had so smugly planned to rescue from his clutches. Certainly he had a right to be indifferent, to even look on her with contempt, to regard her as a narrow-minded woman, with no vision, no understanding of the good and true, and, last of all, to brand her a hopeless egotist. Little wonder he ignored her existence.

"Desert Jack," Norn's foreman, drove up. Brown came up, wearing a linen duster and carrying a small grip. As the men settled themselves in the mountain wagon, the girl felt the prospect of dreary days of self-reproach impel her to rush out and force Norn to listen to her. But, ere she could move, Desert Jack yelled at the dancing ponies, and they were on their way, with Brown in the back seat, frantically clutching at his hat.

Before they were out of the pass, Brown concluded that the driver was a demon who had no regard for human life. Norn seemed to take the driving of his foreman as a matter unworthy of attention. The ponies dashed around the shoulder of Rainmaker, the wagon swaying drunkenly on the edge of a sheer cliff. The two friends in the front seat conversed casually while the light wagon skirted the edge of doom.

"Get into the collar there, you roan loafer!" Desert Jack yelled. "What in Sam Hill do you think this is—a funeral! Move there, you black hawse! What are yeh—a tree!"

And this on the crest of a steep incline, down which they raced like an insane meteor.

When they reached the ranch, Brown almost fell from the wagon. He was deliriously glad to get his feet on good firm ground.

The land-shark could hardly believe his eyes when his host ushered him into the big living-room of the ranch-house. There were big easy chairs, pictures and books, piano, and a fireplace built of selected boulders.

Norn called a Chinese servant who served the fat man with several drinks of excellent whisky.

And over the dinner Brown could have offered up prayerful thanks: salad, fried chicken, a gravy *par excellence*, big, red strawberries, and cold, rich cream.

The dining-room was richly furnished. There was a touch of the medieval in the beamed ceiling, and the heavy, high-backed chairs. Norn, with a white-garbed Chinese at his back, held the quiet dignity of a feudal lord, forced, through a twist of circumstance, to entertain some grubbing commoner.

As the meal progressed, Brown's enthusiasm rose to glorious heights.

"A miracle," he declaimed, "a miracle! Out of desolation into green fields, great trees and all the comforts of civilization. And water is the magician that has worked this wonder. I shall not rest until I look over your ranch."

"I'm afraid I'll have to leave you for a day or two," Norn said, staring up at the beamed ceiling meditatively. "I've a prospect over at Poisoned Spring I must check up. A couple of men are working on it. I'll return by way of what we call the Ridge Trail, and then down the mountain to the ranch. I don't imagine you would care to take a night ride. I prefer traveling at night to escape the heat."

Brown pondered for a few moments.

"Do you ride all night?" he asked, loath to leave the comfortable ranch-house.

"No, no. I take a pack-horse, and camp at midnight."

"Well," and the fat man smiled blandly, "what do you say to my daring the wilds with you?"

Norn's reply was pleasant enough; but to Brown, eager to avail himself of the opportunity to view the ranch boundaries, it seemed tinctured with reluctance.

"Just as you desire, Mr. Brown, but I was a little fearful that you would not care to sleep out."

Brown expanded his chest, and waved his hand carelessly.

"Life is full of ups and downs, as I was telling Miss Wayne the other day. A man of my nature is prepared to take things as they come."

"Splendid philosophy," Norn commended. "Did Miss Wayne agree with you?"

"Quite; although she is not a woman to talk a great deal. But in the main she agrees with me. A remarkable woman—a remarkable woman. I'll warrant you that she will be surprised, though, when I tell her of my adventures in the wilds."

"It must be quite a trial to her," Norn said; "this rough country, and the people with whom she has nothing in common."

"Yes, it is," Brown agreed confidentially. "Really, I don't know what she would do were it not for me. I'm a life-saver to her, Mr. Norn, a mental life-saver."

"Very fortunate, indeed," murmured the rancher. Then, abruptly: "Well, if you've decided to go with me, we'll start shortly. Make yourself comfortable, and I'll have the horses brought up to the porch."

The rancher followed his guest into the living-room.

BROWN smiled as Norn left him. Everything was working out as he desired. They would take a little canter, go into a comfortable camp, and then swing around to the northern boundaries of the ranch. There he would casually ask questions concerning those boundaries, and ascertain beyond a doubt if the water was open to filing. He wandered out on the porch, noting, with secret satisfaction, the great fields of alfalfa. Once in control of the water, all this would be his at his own figures.

Norn was giving Desert Jack some instructions.

"I'm taking the white-faced bay, the black mare and old Jim. We may swing around the mountain and go into Hemper. In any event, you take the buckboard into town in a couple of days, and wait for me."

Desert Jack grunted assent. He had been with Norn since the latter was a baby, and had long since learned never to question his plans.

At twilight the horses were brought up. Brown insisted on tying his little black grip to the saddle. They mounted, and descended into the desert basin, to ride for hours through an interminable gray waste.

At midnight they halted. Brown heard the rancher stamping brush, and then saw a tiny flame lick out through the gloom.

They were in a sandy depression encircled by mesquite. At the far edge of the depression, was a great clump of waterweed, out of which emerged Norn.

"Too bad," reported the rancher. "The hole's dry as a bone. Lucky we've a big canteen of water."

He kicked some brush on the fire.

Brown gave no thought to the dry waterhole, being fully occupied with his physical discomforts. He was stiff and sore from the hard ride, and wanted to lie down. Already he was beginning to regret leaving the ranch. He secured his precious grip, and stood, a big straddle-legged figure, helpless and soft as some Brobdingnagian baby.

Norn proceeded to unburden the packhorse. Then he disappeared for a time, apparently picketing the horses. Returning, he tossed the helpless Brown a blanket.

"Put that under you," he said tersely, "and look out for side-winders."

"Side-winders?" echoed the fat man.

"Yes; rattlesnakes."

Brown quivered like a stranded jellyfish. What an idiot he had been—what a thrice-dashed idiot—to leave the ranch-house. A miserable camp, and rattlesnakes. What sort of a man was this Norn who could lie down so calmly in such a frightful hole?

The rancher spread his blanket, and lay down to sleep.

Brown spread his blanket out full length and seated hmself in the center of it. The fire died down, and the gloom closed in on the ghastly depression. Vainly the snake-shy man attempted to sleep. During his shuddering watches he often thought of starting a fire, but was afraid to leave the imagined safety of the blanket.

Cheerfully Norn greeted the hollow-eyed wretch at dawn. Brown's clothes were wrinkled and rumpled with his sleepless flounderings.

"Get a good rest?" asked the rancher, stretching his arms and arching his chest.

Brown stared at him pathetically.

"It's all in getting used to it," Norn called back, as he disappeared in the mesquite.

Presently the rancher sauntered back.

"Guess we'll have to do a little walking," he said carelessly. "Horses got away."

"What!" Brown almost screamed.

"Nothing to worry about," Norn assured him. "We're both strong and healthy. We can walk over to my prospect in jig time. May have to camp another night, though."

"But I did not anticipate a situation like this," Brown whined.

" 'Life is full of ups and downs,' as you told Miss Wayne," Norn reminded him.

The little camp was now flooded with sunshine. Brown stood back from the fire, while Norn cooked the breakfast. The heat gave the fat man a slight nausea.

They ate in silence. The desert, cruel and implacable, had stripped Brown of his affability and aplomb. Norn seemed concentrated on some vital inner thought.

The rancher proceeded to hang the saddles up in the mesquite, and to cache the camp impedimenta they could not take with them.

"How far will we have to walk?" Brown whined, as Norn gave him the canteen to carry.

"Oh, I don't know the exact distance. We ought to reach Poisoned Spring some time tonight."

The rancher led the way toward the barren hills. Brown lurched after him, burdened with the little black grip and the big canteen.

The desert now, to the fat man, was a cauldron. Norn made no objections to his guest's frequent pulls at the canteen. Brown found his weight of soft flesh becoming a burden that bore him remorselessly earthward. He removed his coat and collar, and finally his shirt. The sun soon blistered his soft, fat neck. Norn swung on like a tireless demon.

"Slow up a bit," the fat man finally gasped.

"We'll have to keep moving," came the merciless reply. "We can't lose time or we'll be out another day."

Brown was pouring the water down his throat when a lean hand took the canteen from him.

"You're drinking too much for your own good," the rancher reproved. "I'll carry the canteen."

Noon, and a pitiless sun that made Brown's fat sizzle. They paused for a short rest. Brown clawed frantically for the canteen, but Norn restrained him.

"Too much water is not too good for any man," said the rancher. "Men new to the desert are apt to get water-logged."

"Please, Mr. Norn," Brown begged in a thin little voice, "one drink. I can scarcely breathe."

"Help yourself, then, if you feel that bad."

Norn passed him the canteen.

No drunkard, with every nerve screaming for alcohol, ever pulled a stopper with greater haste than Brown unscrewed the top of the canteen. He drank steadily as a child nurses a bottle.

"Has it ever occurred to you that I might need a little of that water?" Norn asked, though he had not even moistened his lips since leaving the camp.

"Oh, that's good," Brown was mumbling ecstatically.

Utterly immersed in self, he did not hear Norn's rather sardonic question.

The rancher smiled and took the canteen. Brown's eyes followed it lovingly.

Norn resumed the march. Brown followed because he wanted to keep near the canteen.

THEY failed to reach Norn's mysterious prospect that night. Norn built a fire and fried some bacon. Brown lay groaning, oblivious to the menace of rattlesnakes for once. He was footsore, his lips were swollen and cracked, and every nerve quivered with the frightful exertion he had made. Norn passed him a piece of bread and a rasher of bacon.

The sun, behind bars of crimson and gold and pale lemon, sank into the sea beyond the pass where squatted Hemper. Twilight settled on the ashen desert hills.

"We'll go on to the prospect tomorrow," Norn planned, as he ate his bacon and bread. "We'll have to walk back if we don't catch a freight outfit. Of course, if you don't want to go on, you can return to my place. It's only twenty-five or thirty miles from here. You should be able to make it without water. I have walked it several times without food or water. By going a little out of your way, you could reach Twenty-eight Palms about noon; there's water there."

Brown made no reply, convinced now that the man was insane. The fool was intent on reaching some mysterious point in this God-forsaken land, and for no good reason. A gold prospect, ——! What did the demon want with a gold prospect when he already had a million-dollar ranch. To follow the insane creature would mean another day of torture.

Disconsolate and sodden-faced, Brown waited until convinced that Norn was asleep; then his face brightened with a cunning smile, and he surreptitiously secured the canteen. The *gug-gug* of the water was music to his ears. When he could drink no more, he lowered the canteen, and looked down spitefully at his calmly sleeping host.

Norn had said that the mountains were only twenty-five or thirty miles distant. That meant that Twenty-eight Palms lay not more than a dozen miles from their present camp. He could walk it before dawn, rest in the shade of the palms, saturate himself with water, and in the cool of the night return to Hemper which he vaguely imagined lay somewhere between the two peaks.

A deformed moon was coming up over the desert's edge and he could see the loom of the peaks. He would waken Norn and tell him of his decision. No, not that; Norn was bent on retaining the canteen. Then, there was the matter of food. What arrangements had Norn made for food at the mysterious prospect? Doubtless he had plenty of food and water there. It wouldn't hurt the rancher to go without food and water for a day; he was tough—tough as rawhide. He, Brown, needed food and water—especially water. He would explain to Norn later—when he met him in Hemper. It would be all right.

The miserable man was so intent on escaping from the desert that all his land-grabbing dreams had gone glimmering. He no longer thought of anything except getting the fat body of G. Holden Brown where it would be protected from the merciless sun and where it could fairly wallow in water.

With infinite caution he secured what was left of the bread and bacon, and slung the big canteen over his shoulder. Then he picked up his grip and tiptoed from the camp.

Norn arose quietly. Glancing at the star-strewn sky to get his bearings, he struck out in the direction Brown had taken.

Brown stumbled along as best he could. At the camp he had soothed himself into believing that his appropriation of the food and water would meet with a careless smile from Norn. Now, that he was actually on his way, he realized that he dreaded facing the rancher. But he must not think of that now; the all-important thing was to reach Hemper—alive.

A point of panic glowed in some dark recess of his mind. He thought of the North star, and glanced up at the sky; but the sky was so thickly sown with stars that he could not even distinguish the Big Dipper. His had not been a life of star-gazing.

As he gazed at the sky, his lightly-shod foot struck a cactus. Agony, intense and keen, followed. He hopped about on one foot, whimpering and groaning. Then he dropped his luggage and plumped down in the sand to remove the tiny barbs. They came out of the cringing flesh with infinite reluctance. He was forced to set his light jaws, and jerk quickly.

When the last little barb had been jerked out, he was fairly dripping perspiration. For a time he sat motionless, a rumpled sweat-soaked manikin on the vast floor of the desert.

He thought of time, and took out his watch, and struck a match.

"Great heavens!" he chokingly exclaimed, "it's past midnight!"

Past midnight, and no loom of palms to mark a safe shelter from the merciless sun that would soon rise to torture him.

He took a long pull at the canteen. He shook it, and gasped as he noted how light it was. There came no heavy swing of water, only a light splash. Even as he lowered the canteen, something stirred beneath his feet and he leaped back convulsively, dropping the canteen. His blood was chilled by the faint, dry, whirring sound. Then he thought of the precious water, and fairly blubbered. He lost no time in striking a match, for he was fearful of picking up the canteen before making sure that no gray rattler was within striking distance. The black stain of the wasted water in the gray sand made him whimper. He snatched up the canteen. Miracle of miracles, there was a little water left!

The snake was buzzing in desultory fashion. Brown, after securing his grip and the bacon and bread, backed slowly away from the menacing sound, turned, and, with mincing caution, proceeded toward Witch-talk. A dark spot or a piece of vermiculated cactus stalk filled him with sickening dread. His light shoes and thin stockings made him feel as though his entire body were naked and defenseless.

Two hours of wandering through the gloom and no palms to gladden his aching eyes. He became conscious of a terrible strain, and suddenly gave way under it.

"I'm lost," he whimpered, "lost—lost!"

Then a comforting thought came to him. Men traveled the desert at night. He would shout for help. He raised his voice in a cracked scream that seemed to profane the holy silence. Norn heard that cracked scream and smiled cynically.

Brown listened until he heard the *oom, oom, oom* of his heart, but there came no answering shout. Again he whimpered—

"Lost, lost, lost!"

He wanted to drop down in the sand and cry, but the fear of snakes kept him erect.

As he staggered on he thought of Dora Wayne. She was doubtless sweetly sleeping. In the morning she would appear on the hotel porch dressed in cool linen. She would sit there and calmly watch the men of Hemper. What would she say if he told her how he had escaped from the desert—well, he needed the water more than Norn. Norn was a hard man, used to the desert. He made some attempt to picture her welcoming him with soft sympathy, and bringing him water and bathing his head, but the picture was vague and unsatisfactory.

Then self-pity came to him. Norn hadn't treated him fairly. The rancher had dragged him out on an insane search for some mythical prospect. It was Norn's fault that the horses had not been securely picketed. Everything was Norn's fault; he would tell him so—when he saw him.

At last, utterly fagged, he resolved to dare the snakes and rest. He struck several matches, examined the ground carefully, and sank down, breathing noisily. But he could not rest. He felt that all the creeping, crawling things in the world were headed toward him. Imagination rose like some terrible jinnee. Toward dawn he found himself shivering, and began groping for twigs with which to start a fire. But everything he touched presented implacable stickers and thorns, and he moaned and gave up that project.

* * *

THE dawn was beautiful beyond compare. In the east bloomed banks of tender rose edged with pale gold. The air seemed to sparkle with life. But the man, lurching to his feet, was oblivious to the ineffable glory of the dawn. His very soul slavered to escape from the Hades into which—and he babbled in self-pity—it had been projected through no fault of his own.

Then over the brow of the range of ghastly hills rose the remorseless sun.

The man was appalled at the scene the dawn disclosed. Gray, interminable wastes that reached to the ends of the world. Not a house nor a human being in sight. His sight was not keen enough to note the crouching figure in the wash a few rods to his left.

The peaks seemed no nearer than they had yesterday. And there were no palms waving gleaming green banners of welcome.

Long before noon Brown had drained the canteen, but he still clung to it as a sort of mocking emblem of safety. He had eaten some of the bread, and with difficulty swallowed a piece of the raw bacon. He was afraid to stop even to broil a piece of the bacon. Under the blazing sun, panic drove him forward. He began to make concessions. If he reached Hemper he would not bother about Norn's ranch and the water. He would leave there. . . . But of the girl? He attempted to vision her marrying him and going to San Francisco with him, but the picture was blurred. But he could see himself entering a large, cool café in that city and having a respectful waiter bring him an old-fashioned stein of ice-cold beer. He moaned as he thought of the ice-cold beer.

The little grip was now a burden that taxed his last shred of strength. He halted long enough to hide it securely, as he supposed, in a clump of greasewood. He made no attempt to mark the spot, but childishly reasoned that he could later return in a comfortable conveyance and secure the grip.

By noon he was within a few miles of Hemper. His stomach was sagging like a useless appendage and his tongue filled his mouth like a dried sponge. Glittering points of light stabbed his eyes, his knees trembled, and his hands felt like bloated sacks of blood.

Norn salvaged the little black grip, but did not open it. He followed the lurching Brown until he saw him disappear in the grass and willows that lined an irrigation ditch that purled across the road a half-mile from the limits of Hemper. The fat man was safe now, and would remain for some time at the ditch. The rancher made a little detour to avoid being seen by his late guest, and soon was seated on the steps of the Hemper House.

At his request, Uncle Charlie hastened to bring him a pitcher of water.

Between sips, Norn told Uncle Charlie of Maria's warning against Brown and Twill, and gave a humorous account of the desert trip.

When he had finished, Uncle Charlie went up-stairs and brought down Brown's baggage and set it out on the sidewalk.

"There's no room in my house for a sharper," the old man declared grimly, as he returned to his chair. "Good thing, though, your land takes in all the water, or the fat hog might 'a' caused you the trouble of killing him, instead of jes' runnin' his fat off on the desert. Poor fool, he went by the old maps, and didn't know of the new survey. What about Twill?"

"I might speak to him," Norn said softly.

Just then a curious figure came in view. It weaved and wobbled like a scarecrow suddenly imbued with life. It gave vent to weird sounds, and lovingly patted a big canteen it carried.

It came up on the sidewalk, and, then, as it saw Norn, stopped short, and breathed noisily through its nose like a frightened horse.

"How are you, Mr. Brown?" Norn greeted him kindly. "Quite warm today, isn't it?"

"Oh, you're real—you're real," screamed Brown, staggering toward the rancher. "God, I thought—oh, what did I think!"

He started up the steps but Uncle Charlie barred the way.

"You can't come in here, Brown," the old man told him harshly. "Set on the sidewalk if you want. I'd advise you to take the stage out. There's your baggage out there."

Brown, dumb and fearful, slowly retreated to the edge of the sidewalk and dropped down.

Abner Twill came down the street and noted the curious inert figure seated on the walk. When he recognized Brown and saw the cold gleam in Norn's eyes, he started to cross the street, but Norn's compelling voice halted him.

"Twill, come here."

With the icy fingers of fear clutching his heart, the lawyer approached the rancher.

"You're mixed up in some dirty work," Norn accused; and there was an expression on his face that hinted of cold steel and sudden death. "Take the next stage out."

Twill could not quite lose sight of the law, and ventured to question—

"And if I remain, Mr. Norn?"

"You'll not remain," Norn assured him.

It was all too slow for Uncle Charlie. He must needs rush in and secure the old Sharpe's.

"I'll take a hand here, myself," he bawled. "Twill, when that stage comes—they're hitchin' fresh hawses now—and you don't board it, you're a dead jackleg. I've always wanted to kill a lawyer."

The stage rattled up to the hotel. Uncle Charlie crossed his fat legs and rested the old buffalo gun across his knee.

Twill gulped, looked around vainly for some avenue of escape, and then said something that stirred Brown to groaning action.

Some grinning, but mystified Hemperites tossed up Brown's baggage to the driver, but when an obliging youth came to the little black grip, he gave it too much power. The driver failed to catch it, and it dropped on the other side of the stage, gapped open and disgorged its contents. The west wind, sweeping the streets of Hemper, picked up sundry maps and legal papers referring to the Norn ranch, and blew them into weeds, into cottonwood trees, and under the sidewalk. The youth tossed up the empty grip to the impatient driver.

Brown, escorted by Twill, was too exhausted to note the catastrophe that had befallen his precious grip.

The lawyer helped his client into the stage and stood for a moment debating the feasibility of defying the two grim men on the porch.

"Get in," came the landlord's warning bellow; and Twill got in.

"That makes this a pretty decent town now," said Uncle Charlie, with a satisfied air as the stage rattled away. "That ends the jackleg and that ends Brown."

"Yes," Norn pleasantly agreed, "thanks to your persuasive powers, that ends Brown. But I'm out a good canteen. He took it with him."

CHAPTER VII

SINCE that night Dora Wayne had so coldly informed him of her utter lack of interest in him or his affairs, Chance Hardy's thoughts had traveled many dark and devious trails. But he invariably returned to the fact of her indifference, not only to him but to all men. Rivalry would have stirred him to action, but her calm indifference to all had created a democracy of unrequited loves. This baffled him. There was no man against whom he could proceed.

For a time, especially following the vanquishing of Bundy, Hardy had regarded Norn suspiciously; but, as the days slipped by, and no words passed between the rancher and the girl, the gambler's suspicions drew back into their subconscious lair.

With the passing of Maria—the gambler had declined to join Uncle Charlie's posse, considering Indians beneath his notice—Hardy's suspicions had peered out only to draw back before the fact of Norn's long and friendly interest in the Indian child. The rancher had not sought to impress Dora Wayne with his prowess as an Indian fighter.

The Brown episode might have caused Hardy to believe that Norn had removed the fat man because of the latter's everlasting dancing of attendance on the girl, had not a henchman brought the gambler one of the papers the little black grip had disgorged. The paper plainly indicated the Brown plot to secure, by a legal twist, the water supply of the Norn ranch.

Hardy marveled at the mercy Norn had shown the fat schemer. Brown's scarecrow appearance, following his visit to the Norn ranch, and his abrupt departure from Hemper under the menace of Uncle Charlie's Sharpe's, evidenced a consideration on Norn's part that was beyond the gambler. Under like provocation, Hardy would have killed Brown with no more regret than old Chang accorded the beheading of a chicken. As it was, the gambler had been tempted several times to run the fat man out of town.

The gambler looked out moodily through the barred window of his saloon. He saw Norn on the porch of the hotel.

A stage barn-helper brought up a big cream-colored horse and a black pony.

Presently Dora and Dickie came out. The girl was attired in a riding-habit that accentuated the gracious contours and luring curves of her perfect body. Her hair hung in a thick, dark braid and she wore a cavalierish scarlet hat that sported a jeweled buckle.

Dickie, now beginning to show the beneficial results of dry, bracing air, ran down the steps and eagerly mounted his pony.

Hardy noted that Norn merely lifted his hat to the girl. A black flood of desire welled up thickly within the gambler as he watched her swing up and into the saddle. From where he stood he could discern the rose-tint in her cheeks, and the flash of her white teeth. She was radiant, a flame of womanliness that maddened him. He must possess her. With face working and fists clenched he turned from the window. There must be some way to force her to come to him. She would never love him, of that he was convinced, but he would dispense with sentiment if he could only possess her. Yet there seemed to be no way—she cared for nothing. But, and he stopped short, there was the boy; she loved him.

The gambler entered his little sanctum and slowly seated himself. A plan was beginning to form in his mind—a dark and desperate plan.

Dora and Dickie cantered down the desert road.

As they descended the sharp slope of the pass, the cool air of the mountains gave way to shimmering heat waves rising from the desert basin.

"We could have postponed our ride until sundown," the girl told her brother who was for pressing on into the desert. "We had better return now, laddie."

As they turned their horses, a lone rider emerged from a great wash that lay a few rods beyond them. It was Pete, coming in to discuss with Hardy certain plans for a wider range of activities, and to fix more firmly the chieftainship with which Hardy had so carelessly invested him.

Bundy had been content to let Hardy plan the campaigns, to simply obey orders; but Pete was of a more individualistic stripe. A secret ambition for supreme command now flowered in his heart. He felt he did not need Hardy for a mental crutch, and, unlike Bundy, he had no fear of the man. But he knew that the Hardy influence was far-reaching, and that, until more securely entrenched in power and prestige, he must walk slowly in the gambler's shadow.

As Pete racked up on his powerful black horse, Dora rode ahead of Dickie to let the man pass. Pete rode up even with her, and slowed his gait to hers.

The girl's face became a mask of haughtiness. The intruder evidently intended to preempt Dickie's place. In a swift sideglance she noted the heavy gun swinging on the man's hip.

"I'm in no rush," Pete opened, with such ingratiating friendliness that the girl concluded to endure him.

Her uncle had told her that Western men always spoke to every man, woman and child they met on the road. After all, there was no good reason why she should not be civil to him.

"We were just taking a little ride," she said politely. "We found the heat oppressive and turned back."

Pete drew a deep breath. He had seen Dora on the hotel porch, but there had been the width of the street between them. Now, close to her, he saw that she was all that he ever dreamed a woman could be. The superb elegance of her dress and equipment, her erect gracious form, her violet eyes shaded by the scarlet hat, and the thick, gleaming braid that swept the cantle of the saddle, all formed a picture that filled his hungry eyes—eyes that had known only filthy under-sized Mexican women, slattern white bawds of the border, and the flimsy girls of the desert towns and camps.

Yet Pete was no fool to blindly throw aside caution. Certain primeval desires flamed up within him, but he fought them back. She was the loveliest woman he had ever seen, but a saving streak of common sense told him that she was not to be won by any of the usual desert methods. Bundy had tried one of those usual methods, and now Bundy sat in camp croaking like a sick crow. Then there were three men to consider, Hardy, Norn, and Uncle Charlie. His desert intuition told him that Hardy had a watchful and desirous eye on the woman. No woman as lovely as she could fail to attract the gambler's attention. As for Norn—well, he had half-killed Bundy for simply attempting to kiss the girl. Uncle Charlie had many friends, and might prove, if given cause, as relentless as a wounded bear.

No, he would present his best side and leave a pleasant impression. Later, when secure in his leadership of the gang, he would boldly enter the field.

"Yes, I reckon 'tis hot to folks not used to it," he agreed, with a bland smile. "But it's cool up here to what it is ten miles down. Many's the time I've left town with my teeth a-chatterin' and, inside of two hours' ride, be jes' hot—yes, ma'am, hot as could be."

THE EXPATIATED on the climatic conditions of the desert, and gave her an elaborate description of the desolate country that lay back of them.

Dora smiled at his earnest efforts to make conversation. Then she glanced back at Dickie and frowned slightly.

"I'll ride on," Pete offered meekly, "If I'm botherin' you."

"It doesn't matter," she lightly returned. "though I fear we are giving my brother more dust than is good for him. He is not very strong."

"Hard lines for a boy to be sick," commiserated Pete, glancing back at Dickie. "All right; I'll be siftin' along."

Pete's eyes were now like burning topaz shot with jet, and about his mouth was a drawn expression that accentuated the predatory curve of his nostrils.

She reined in her horse. The desert rover strove to bid her an elaborate farewell, but the withdrawal of her presence hurt him like the pulling of a barbed arrow from his chest. He could only turn in his saddle and call, in a harsh voice he scarcely recognized as his own—

"Good-by."

The girl did not answer. Pete rode into Hemper, bowed over his saddle-horn as though nursing a wound.

Dickie rode up to his sister with loud demands for "spurs and a gun like that cowboy had." He had been admiring Pete's glittering Mexican spurs and pearl-handled gun.

"You shall have the spurs," Dora promised, "but you are not old enough to have a revolver."

"Mr. Norn will let me have a revolver when I go out to his ranch," the boy said, a little rebelliously. "I bet I could shoot one right now. I'm not afraid to shoot one."

Dora wished that Dickie had not mentioned Norn. The boy was forever talking about the rancher. Always, when she put aside thoughts of Norn, came Dickie with his chatter of him to intensify her self-reproach for that Puritanical outburst.

"You seem to think Mr. Norn a wonderful man, laddie," she observed, a trace of irritation in her tone.

Dickie's response was disconcerting.

"I like him 'cause he doesn't bother you."

"You are not jealous of your sister?" This in a low voice, and with a vague realization of the truth of the old saw—"Out of the mouth of babes——"

"No-o-o," the boy hesitated.

"What then?"

"Aw, I just don't like men that bother you."

"Then you haven't much cause to worry." Teasingly.

"You bet I have," declared Dickie emphatically. "Mr. Brown bothered you, didn't he?"

The boy grinned like a young satyr.

The girl flushed. Uncle Charlie had told her of Brown's plot to secure Norn's heritage, and of the fat man's failure to meet the desert test. Doubtless, since she had tolerated the smug trickster, Norn now regarded her as a feminine counterpart of the Brown type.

Dickie, ever restless, suddenly proposed that they dismount and build a camp-fire; and to his sister's astonishment proudly exhibited three matches he had hoarded against just such an exigency. To humor him and to lighten her mental gloom, the girl dismounted and pretended that she was a princess a loyal knight had rescued from the cruel robbers and taken to his camp in the forest. She helped the enthusiastic lad build a little camp-fire and played with him, breathing a deep prayer of thankfulness for his returning health and strength.

PETE turned his horse into the stage stable corral, and entered the Hardy saloon through the back door. Hardy immediately called him into a card-room and proceeded to sound him for loyalty and willingness to faithfully obey orders.

"I've been thinkin', Pete," the gambler said softly, after satisfying himself of Pete's loyalty, "that you and me should have got together long ago. Bundy never had your judgment, and I was afraid to give him a big job."

"Uh huh," murmured Pete, haunted by a memory of violet eyes beneath a scarlet hat.

"This girl——"

Pete nearly lost his balance as he straightened up in his chair. Then caution whispered to him.

"What girl?" he queried lazily.

"Why, the Wayne girl—Uncle Charlie's niece."

The gambler looked at his head man in frank astonishment. It were as though Pete had asked, "What moon?" or "What sun?"

"Well, what about her?" Indifferently.

"She's got a lot of money," said the gambler in a low, tense voice, and leaning toward the sprawling Pete. "A lot of it, Pete—thousands and thousands of dollars of cold cash."

"You don't expect us to hold her up, do you?" drawled Pete, surveying the gambler indolently through half-closed eyes. "Them kind of people don't carry their dinero around with them."

Hardy cursed the dullness of the sprawling, indifferent man.

"I'm no mind-reader," Pete grumbled. "You have to tell me what you want in United States English."

"It's just this," and Hardy drew closer, "she's all wrapped up in that sickly kid. Get the kid and she'll let go of a load of cold money to see him safe."

"What next?" Pete asked, eyes on the ceiling, thumbs hooked in cartridge-belt.

"I'll 'tend to that," Hardy snapped abruptly. "You-all will get a thousand apiece out of it. All you have to do is to corral the boy somehow, send me word, and I'll see that you get the money."

"But how about Uncle Charlie and his friends?" Pete drawled thoughtfully.

"They'll think the kid is lost. The girl won't say a word; I'll see to that."

"Then you'll tell her that we got the boy?"

Hardy nodded.

"Seems to me," Pete objected, "that would make things sort o' hot for us after we throwed her back the kid. 'Taint likely she'd set still. She'd still have plenty of money, and a woman never lets up."

This was a delicate point, Hardy realized. The gang's sole purpose was to secure money; there was no section in its unwritten by-laws pertaining to woman or kidnaping. But he was offering money—a thousand dollars to each member of the gang. That should satisfy them and keep them in line.

Hardy decided to lay his cards on the table, faces up.

"The bunch'll get a thousand apiece, and I'll sweeten you a little, Pete," he said flatly. "That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"But why bother us with the boy," countered Pete. "Why not grab the girl? She——"

Pete checked himself abruptly. He did not want Hardy to know, for various reasons, that he had ever addressed the girl.

"I come across country," he went on, pretending thoughtfulness, "and I saw some woman in the stage road. She had on a red hat and rode a light horse. Was that her?"

"Yes, yes," Hardy assented eagerly. "She rides a lot—her and the kid."

"Why, then, not grab her, and not fool with the kid?"

"I want her myself," Hardy burst out with an intensity that left no doubt as to his desires. "I'll marry her. She'll have to marry me or lose the kid. After she marries me, she can't say anything."

"Was you figgerin' on us blinkin' out the kid's life if it come to a show-down?"

"Yes," the gambler snarled, his jaw muscles bulging. Then his face cleared, and he shook his head. "But it won't come to that. She'll do anything if she thinks it will save the kid."

"But I don't see yet why we shouldn't

grab her," insisted Pete, seemingly thick-headed.

Hardy scowled. Pete was a good man, but there was a streak of mulishness in him.

"Listen here," the gambler snapped impatiently, "I say I want the woman. I'm not sayin' you and the bunch wouldn't treat her right and throw her over to me, but I'm free to tell you, I'm takin' no chances. Money is one thing and woman another. I want this one, and I'm ready to pay any kind of coin for her—any kind of coin, Pete, and don't you forget it."

The gambler's tone made the nerves tinkle in Pete's gun-arm, but he merely stared up at the ceiling, and mumbled a non-committal "Uh huh." So Hardy would not trust him with the woman, but, nevertheless, expected him to do the dirty work? Hardy anticipated no trouble after the boy was returned to his sister, for the black reason that the Hardy brand would then be on the girl. Pete debated the feasibility of killing Hardy then and there. One lightning move and the gambler would be a dead man, and dead men have no influence or power. What then would hinder him from doing as Hardy proposed doing? Why should Hardy secure the girl and put him off with a thousand dollars? What was a thousand dollars compared to such a woman?

Though there was nothing in Pete's expression to excite suspicion, the gambler vaguely sensed danger. Automatically he moved back a little, and let his hand fall carelessly inside his coat. Pete knew that Hardy generally carried a short gun in a shoulder-holster, and decided to postpone the killing until a more opportune time.

"All right," Pete agreed, crisply. "We'll grab the boy the first chance we get, and send you word."

But the outlaw's mind was busy with plans that did not include meekly submitting to those outlined by Hardy. Of one thing he was sure: he would kill Hardy before the gambler placed his brand on the girl. He would report the capture of the boy, collect the money, and then kill the gambler. Then he would force the girl to marry him by threatening to do away with the boy.

"Then it's a go?"

"Yes."

Pete arose with his thumbs inside his belt, thus avoiding shaking hands on the compact.

"Have a drink," Hardy invited.

"No, thanks. Stomach out of kilter."

Hardy looked after Pete somewhat admiringly, as the latter strode over to the window. A little thick-headed, but a steady, reliable man who knew enough to leave whisky in the barrel.

The gambler joined Pete at the window. What he saw made his black eyes brighten.

Dickie was being assisted by Norn into the latter's buckboard.

"There's our chance," Pete muttered out of the corner of his mouth; and hurried from the saloon.

It was Uncle Charlie who left Norn little or no excuse for postponing Dickie's visit to the ranch.

When Dora and Dickie returned to the hotel after their little play by the camp-fire, the boy noted Norn's waiting buckboard, and shouted impulsively—

"Now, Mr. Norn, may I go to your ranch?"

"Take him out, King," Uncle Charlie boomed. "It'll do him good to get away from being babied by these wimmin around here."

Dora came up on the porch, with Dickie clinging to her arm and begging—

"Let me go, sis, please?"

She seated herself and drew off her gloves.

"But I'm afraid you will be too much bother to Mr. Norn."

She flashed Norn a radiant smile, which brought no response. Her face clouded. Would the man never give her an opportunity to tell him of her aching regret for those silly, prudish words!

"I'll look after you," Norn told the boy, avoiding Dora's mournful eyes.

"Very well, laddie," sighed the girl, giving up all hope of coaxing Norn into the trap of conversation. "Run up and tell Mrs. Milliken to get you ready."

Norn found it necessary to arrange some things in the back of the buckboard, although Desert Jack was there to attend to such matters.

As they started, Dickie waved a wild, joyous farewell to his sister, and Norn touched his hat, but whether the salute was meant for Uncle Charlie or her, the girl could not decide. She heard Norn warn Jack to drive carefully, and her heart warmed at the thoughtfulness of the man. Dickie was safe in such hands.

After the buckboard had disappeared down the desert road, the girl turned to find her uncle studying her.

"What's the matter between you and King Norn?" the old man asked gently. "King hasn't said a word to you that I know of since you come. Somethin' wrong, Dora. He's the friendliest sort of boy and white as they make 'em. What's wrong? I hate to hear that a niece of mine didn't know a white man when she saw one."

"Oh, nothing is wrong," she faintly assured him. "I presume that Mr. Norn—"

But she did not finish. Instead she went over to her uncle, patted his cheek, and ran her fingers through his thick gray shock. Then she gathered up her riding-habit, whirled, and almost ran up-stairs.

CHAPTER VIII

PETE on entering the camp at the foot of Witch-talk, immediately assembled the gang and told them of Hardy's order for the kidnaping of the boy, and dwelt impressively on the gambler's promise of a thousand dollars to each member of the gang as soon as the seizure of the lad was reported to him. Pete stated that he did not know whether Hardy would draw on his own money or force the girl to pay the ransom.

"But that's no truck of ours," he urged, as some growls of disapproval greeted his announcement. "As long as we get the money, we got no cause to ask questions. Hardy guarantees the coin and no trouble after the boy is throwed loose."

Then he quickly launched the plan of campaign.

"The boy's at Norn's ranch; saw him go out today. My idee is to close in on the ranch, and pick up the kid so it will look like he's lost. If he's on the pony, see that he never hits the ground until he's in rocky country. We'll scatter, and the man that grabs the kid is to take him to Coyote Wells. I figger that no man could spot a trail over that rocky country. Head north of Twenty-eight Palms, and keep to the ridges. Whoever gets the kid is to leave a cross of rocks at Twenty-eight Palms. Just lay out some stones in the shape of a cross. We'll be driftin' back and forwards from Twenty-eight Palms to Norn's place. As fast as you find out that the boy is grabbed, go on to Coyote Wells. The cross of rocks will tell you what's what. But cover trail—cover trail."

"Norn is a bad hombre on a trail," demurred Jenkins, the hawk-nosed humorist who had been so free with gibes for the miserable Bundy. He's a stayer and will hang and rattle to a trail. Norn's no fool, either. Besides he has some wolves a-workin' for him. This looks like a man-sized job to me."

"Suit yourself, Jack," Pete said indifferently. "If you don't want to set in on this, say so, and you're off the list for the thousand."

"Aw, I'm in on it," Jenkins hastily assured him, "but I'm a little leery of Norn."

"Well," sneered Pete, "if your stomach's weak, you'd better see a doctor. This is no place for sick men."

Jenkins subsided, and under Pete's quick, terse orders they began breaking camp.

Bundy, though he had made no objections, displayed no enthusiasm for the work. He dawdled about camp, and Pete and the other men were ready for the trail ere he had saddled his horse.

"You can watch Big Wash," Pete told Bundy, impatiently. "We'll go on to Norn's seein' that you're goin' to take all day to throw on a saddle."

Bundy made no reply, and the gang rode forth from the camp to be scattered out, under Pete's direction, in much the same fashion that a round-up boss sends forth his riders. The general orders were to work in close to the ranch during the day, and make Twenty-eight Palms a night camp.

Bundy was sore and discouraged. Pete had not consulted him, and had given him a minor part. The boy would never come down Big Wash.

The mountain stream that watered Norn's ranch disappeared in the sands of Big Wash a short distance from the cañon that wound back through Norn's little empire. Up to where the stream disappeared there was a heavy growth of willows along the banks of the ever-deepening channel. From the willows, the great dry wash, deep and wide enough to hide a marching army, wound across the desert toward the eastern side of the basin.

Bundy could reach Big Wash in a few minutes' ride. He decided not to exert himself. He would obey Pete's order, but he would make no strenuous effort. Though he wanted the thousand dollars, he half-hoped that Hardy's plan would fall through, for he now hated the gambler far more than he hated Norn. Norn had merely given him a beating, but Hardy had, without good cause, pulled him down from the heights of leadership and made him a cipher in the eyes of the gang. He was even tempted to slip into Hemper and warn the girl, but he could not face the conflict with Hardy that such a procedure would inevitably bring. Hardy would surely kill him at the first suspicion of treachery.

Leisurely Bundy rode out to Big Wash, and followed it about half-way across the basin. Then he dismounted and rested and smoked. At nightfall he returned to the camp at the foot of Witch-talk.

DICKIE was delighted beyond power of expression at the opportunities the ranch offered to a wild, free rover. Norn gave the boy a steady old saddle-horse, and let him run free over the ranch, warning him against all possible dangers. Dickie was just a fair rider, and many things might happen that would result in breaking a leg or an arm. Then there were the big mountain rattlers that the lad might not see before it was too late. But it was impossible for Norn to be with Dickie every minute, and impossible to keep the youngster close to the house. The boy had gained greatly in strength and vitality, and was bubbling over with curiosity regarding the big cañon that wound up from Norn's ranch into the mysterious fastness of Rain-maker.

As the days passed Dickie became familiar with the cañon, and displayed such an amount of self-reliance that Norn began to feel at ease. When the lad came in fairly yelping with excitement, and displaying the rattlers of a big diamond-back, Norn congratulated him heartily on winning the trophy.

"I killed him with rocks," panted Dickie. "My pony jumped back when he rattled, and I got some rocks and killed the snake. Say, Mr. Norn, he was a big one. Long after I had killed him he kept moving. I had to hold him down with a stick and chop his rattles off with another."

"You're getting to be quite a desert-rat," Norn complimented.

Dickie straightened up manfully. He was showing Norn that he was a regular man.

"I guess the boy can take care of himself," Norn told Desert Jack that night. "He's city-raised, but he has plenty of spirit. There isn't a cowardly hair in his head. Got a good brain too, and clever beyond his years."

Dickie found the cañon an attractive playground, but he often longed to dare the mysteries of the desert that lay shimmering in the sun far below the green fields of the ranch.

One clear afternoon, when there was just the faintest hint of Fall in the air, Dickie rode up the cañon. He was an imaginative boy, and often amused himself by creating little dramas in which he took the leading part. This habit had been fostered by ill health which forbade his taking part in the usual games and pastimes of strength-blessed youngsters. Also, he had read many stories of adventure, and the heroic characters of the frontier moved through his boyish dreams, invested by a precocious imagination with god-like powers.

When he came to the stream that brawled down the cañon, he recalled that his favorite hero invariably threw the redskins off the trail by riding down the center of a stream. Immediately he preempted the hero's part, listening, smiling contemptuously, and going through the motions of examining a rifle. Then, continuing the play, he turned his pony and rode down the shallow stream, and, unnoticed, passed through the wide cordon Pete had thrown around the ranch.

The complaining voice of the stream was soon stilled in the sands of Big Wash. The lad reined in, wondering what a hero should do when his stream disappears. Then he discarded the idea of being pursued by Indians and decided that he was an explorer lost in the wilds of Africa. The great sunken smooth-floored way, twisting and turning mysteriously, invited him on.

The pony, too, liked the smooth floor of the wash, and quickened his pace. The boy enjoyed the sense of power and freedom that a good horse gives a rider, and let the pony go his way unchecked. It was pleasant to rack around abrupt curves, to draw in deep breaths of the dry invigorating air and to hum vague little songs.

Then Dickie's stomach sent him a hunger-warning. He visioned the big dining-room of the ranch-house, and decided that a large bowl of bread and milk would be a most satisfactory finale to a perfect day. With some misgivings, he noted that the sun was setting, and decided to get out of the wash. He had a vague idea of cutting across country to the ranch. But to him the sheer banks of the wash offered no egress, and he was half-minded to double back over his old trail.

Suddenly the wash flared out and merged with another great wash beyond which a mountain loomed. Dusk was settling down and the desert lay shrouded in gray gloom before the wondering eyes of the boy. Completely turned around, the loom of Witch-talk was to him the towering shape of Rain-maker.

Recalling that one of his heroes had trusted to the intelligence of his horse to take him safely through the trackless wilds, he dropped the reins over the saddle-horn and let the old desert pony go his way. But the horse had no intention of returning to the ranch when there was water and green grass within a few minutes' canter. In other days he had often visited the sheltered nook at the foot of Witch-talk, and was now headed straight for that desirable grazing-ground.

Dickie saw a little fire winking through the trees and imagined that in some miraculous fashion he had returned to Norn's cañon.

The pony, intent on reaching the water, racked up eagerly, and it was with difficulty that Dickie reined him in near the fire.

"What's wanted?" came a strange voice from the darkness.

Dickie looked about him. This wasn't the ranch.

"I guess I'm lost," he answered bravely enough.

Bundy approached the fire, easing down the hammer of his rifle.

Dickie dismounted. Bundy seized the lad's arm and drew him over to the fire. The boy looked up and recognized the man who had insulted his sister. He jerked free, and drew back.

"You're a bad man," he shrilled. "If I were big enough, I'd whip you."

Bundy laughed softly.

"You scared my sister," Dickie accused, with a great show of hostility.

"Now, kid," Bundy soothed, "you're jes' hungry. I'll get you something to eat."

Dickie made a manly attempt to hold his hostile attitude, but weakened before the insistent clamors of his stomach, and the man's friendliness.

Bundy swiftly prepared a meal for the boy.

"There you are," the man said, when the meal was ready. "Throw that into you, and you'll feel better. That's mountain-sheep. It'll make the hair grow on your chest. Dig into it."

Dickie seated himself by the fire and fell to eating.

"I know you got reasons for not likin' me," Bundy gently admitted, "but I didn't mean to scare your sister. My horse started pitchin' and I couldn't hold him. I'm sorry about it."

AS THE boy ate, he found it increasingly difficult to regard the man as an enemy. Food is the open-sesame to a boy's heart. And then, had the man not said he was sorry? A gentleman, according to Dickie's code, always forgave those who admitted the error of their ways.

When his hunger was appeased, the boy decided he would forgive the man. He was a little doubtful as to how to proceed, but decided that shaking hands would indicate suspension of hostilities. So he arose and approached Bundy who was seated Turk-fashion by the fire.

The boy extended his hand.

"Your 'pology is accepted," he said, quoting one of his heroes.

Bundy grinned and shook the lad's hand heartily.

"You're a thoroughbred," he said; and he held the boy's hand a little longer than was necessary.

Bundy felt that his luck had turned. The gang was at Twenty-eight Palms, and would have to bear the brunt of the battle with Norn and Uncle Charlie. The boy was in his power, and he proposed to ingratiate himself in the lad's favor to such an extent that the youngster would not question his motives. He would take the lad to the desert hills, and follow the rocky ridge of the range back into the fastnesses of Rain-maker. Norn would, doubtless, strike the trail of the boy and follow it to Witch-talk.

Bundy walked over to Dickie's pony. Yes, the horse was shod and would leave an unmistakable trail. But once on the rocky ridge of the desert range, even a shod horse would leave no trail. Norn would follow the trail to the desert hills, but would lose it on the ridge. Then there was the possibility of the rancher clashing with the gang before reaching the desert hills.

Secure in some retreat among the crags of Rain-maker, he would fit up a little camp for the boy, and prevail on him to remain there. Then he would take the horses and slip down to Hemper. There, under the cover of darkness, he would contrive to get word to the girl that he had rescued her brother from the gang, but that the boy had been weakened by the harsh experience, and was too ill to move. He would tell the girl that the lad was constantly calling for her, and that he believed the boy would die unless she immediately came to his rescue.

He would demand that she secretly accompany him back to the boy. He would tell her of Hardy's part in the affair, convince her that he had endangered his life by coming into town. He would point out that the only thing for her to do would be to safeguard the one man who knew of the boy's whereabouts. If she threatened to betray him, he would pretend to wash his hands of the whole affair. If she asked him why he had rescued the boy from the gang, he would indicate the fact of the gambler having deposed him from leadership as the motive for revenge, and, for good measure, pretend that he desired to make amends for having insulted her. To prove the truth of his statements he would show her some article belonging to the boy, or he might possibly prevail on the lad to write her a note.

Then, when he had the girl in his power, he would work south by degrees, and into Mexico. Perhaps, after tiring of her, he would exact from her a heavy ransom and release her.

He was uncertain as to what he would do with the boy.

Of one thing, however, he was certain. His revenge against Hardy would be full and complete. Pete, too, would have good cause to remember him. He would find a way to get a mocking message to the gang.

"I'll show 'em all where I head in," he muttered, as he returned to the fire.

"Feelin' better, kid?" he asked, smiling down at the boy.

"Yes, sir," Dickie politely assented.

"How'd you like to have me take you back to Norn's tonight?"

"I'd like it," the boy said cheerfully.

"Well, then, you jes' rest till I get my hawse ready."

Bundy led the way from the camp, veering south to strike the desert hills far beyond Twenty-eight Palms. It was a gray night, but the man knew every trail and wash in the basin, and without difficulty entered the desert hills, leading the boy's horse, since Dickie was beginning to show signs of fatigue.

"I guess we'd better camp," Bundy told the boy, when they came to the head of one of the rock-ribbed cañons whose tributaries led up to the barren ridge over which he expected to swing north to Rain-maker. "There's water here, and I'm kind o' lost. Besides, you're tired. Ain't you tired, kid?"

"Yes," admitted the boy wearily.

Bundy helped the lad dismount, and unrolled a blanket he had tied on the back of his saddle.

"Lay down on this," he said, spreading out the blanket.

"All right," murmured the stiff and weary Dickie, sleepily.

Bundy wrapped the blanket about the boy, tucking it under his feet snugly, and insisting that the lad keep his arms under cover. When the man had finished tucking in the blanket, the boy looked like a swathed mummy.

Dickie was soon fast asleep.

Bundy, though he had no blanket, sprawled out on the ground, with a saddle for a pillow, and his weapons close at hand.

Presently he, too, was asleep.

* * *

FOR a long time the big mountain rattler watched the huge recumbent figure. His snakeship had ventured from a snug retreat not far from the spring, in quest of rats. He had been weaving along, concerned entirely with his hunger, when suddenly before him a huge mountain stirred. Immediately he coiled, and sounded his warning. Then, as the mountain failed to make any hostile move, the snake relaxed his tense coil, half-minded to crawl away. But the mountain moved again, and he immediately resumed his tense coil, sounding his dry, deadly warning.

Bundy was lying on his back, but some

irregularity in the ground made that position uncomfortable, and gradually the subconscious mind became aware of that discomfort, and signaled the body to turn over. Bundy turned over, his right arm extended. Then he thrust out his hand, to rest his arm full length on the ground. The rattler saw that hand approach him in what he believed to be a menacing fashion, and struck out and hooked his fangs in a finger. Bundy awoke with heart-shaking suddenness, to hear the low whirr of the rattler. He sucked in his breath as he felt a dart of pain in his finger. He grabbed his gun and fired at the dark mound from which ensued the dry, deadly buzzing.

The roar of the gun jerked poor Dickie from slumber with a suddenness that nearly wrecked his nerves. He fought his way out of the blanket, whimpering and half-sobbing. The darkness and the strange environment into which the bellow of the heavy six-shooter had suddenly precipitated the boy, made him forget for the nonce that he was a brave man, and he relapsed into whimpering childishness.

Bundy, disregarding all caution, found a match, and in feverish haste started a fire.

"He got me," sobbed the man. Then, in a mad, unreasonable rage, he began trampling the snake. Dickie stared at the wild spectacle, his little heart pounding furiously against his ribs.

As Bundy trampled the rattler, he cursed wildly and hopelessly. There was a wailing note of doom in his voice that made the lad's skin prickle.

The fire flamed up, and the man saw the boy's white, drawn face through a red haze of rage, and realized he was wasting time. He leaped over the fire, rasping out in a choked voice:

"Come here, boy—quick! A snake bit me! You got to help me. Here's my knife! Come now, quick! Hurry, boy, or I'm a goner!"

Slowly Dickie approached the fire and started at the man's hand.

"Right there on that finger—see—cut it lengthways, then across."

Shuddering, but filled with sympathy for the man, the boy took the knife awkwardly. Bundy knelt and laid his hand on his knee.

"I'm up against it, son," he told Dickie with forced calmness. "You're the only one to help me."

The man's appeal gave the lad a new lease on his courage, and he tightened his jaws and dropped down on his knees; but, when he made the first gash in the finger, he cringed and averted his face.

Bundy patted the boy's shoulder encouragingly.

"Brace up, kid. Now slash it across."

"Does it hurt?" Dickie quavered, shuddering.

"——, no!" roared the man. "Cut it—quick!"

Dickie made a supreme effort, steadied his hand, and slashed the finger across.

"Now, son," explained Bundy, forcing himself to speak casually, lest the lad succumb to the strain he was putting on him, "I'll have to ask you to suck the blood out of that finger. It won't hurt you because your mouth is clean. I can't do it myself, because I smoke so much that my mouth is raw. So, if you suck the blood out, you will take the snake poison with it, and save my life. If you don't I'll die here pretty quick. Do you want me to die?"

"No," gulped Dickie, his eyes wide with the dread of death.

It was the supreme test of the boy's courage and will power. The sight of the blood nauseated him, and his senses reeled as he thought of putting the finger in his mouth, but he seized Bundy's hand and faithfully obeyed the low-toned directions of the man.

"There, that's good," Bundy said, gratefully. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," returned Dickie, his nostrils flaring and striving to wipe the taste of the blood from his tongue with the back of his hand.

Bundy drew a silk handkerchief from his shirt pocket, and tied it around his forearm. He broke off a piece of greasewood, and twisted the handkerchief with all his strength. Then he pressed his arm against his side to hold the tourniquet in position.

But the rattler that had bitten Bundy was old, and the venom he had injected into the veins of the man was like liquid fire.

Bundy realized that he must get to a doctor or perish. Like most desert-rats he had a contempt for rattlesnakes, and had never bothered about carrying an antidote for snake-bite.

There was only one thing to do, take the boy and ride to Hemper. There he would turn the lad over to his uncle, and tell him that he had rescued him from the gang. That would of course require the connivance of the lad, which meant making a clean breast of the whole affair to him, and trusting to his boyish sympathy.

"Listen, son," he began hurriedly. "We got to get out of here, and hit the trail for Hemper. Now I want you to play square with me. I want you to lie for me."

The boy regarded him with round wondering eyes.

"It is wrong to lie," he stated emphatically. "My sister says it is wrong to lie."

The man bowed his head slightly, as though in mute obeisance to the clean, little soul confronting him.

"Yes, I know, son," he admitted gently, "it is wrong to lie, but this is a case where a lie will save my life. You see, boy, I didn't take you home as I said I would. That will make men in Hemper want to kill me or put me in jail. But, if you say I took you from some other men and started home with you, that will save my life. I got to go to Hemper so a doctor can cure my snake-bite."

"I'll lie for you to save your life," Dickie promised solemnly.

"But will you do as I say? Will you tell everybody like this, 'He took me from some men and brought me home?' Say it."

"Yes, sir," the boy agreed; and slowly repeated—

"'He took me from some men and brought me home.'"

"Shake on it?"

For answer the lad laid his hand in the man's huge paw.

CHAPTER IX

HE WAS known as the Apache Kid, though he had no Indian blood in his veins. A childless squaw had found him cooing and gurgling in a "grub" box, following a massacre of some foolhardy Argonauts. She had taken the baby to her heart, and, in the years that followed, he not only became versed in Indian cunning, but acquired a snake-like quickness with the white man's weapon, the six-shooter. Ere he had the suspicion of a hair on his face he had killed his first man.

Killing followed killing until even the most hardened desperadoes of the then lawless Southwest came to regard the Apache Kid as the apogee of deadliness. Many gun-twirlers secretly longed to kill him, not through any desire to benefit the general public, but to acquire at one shot the Kid's red fame. Now and then the Mexican border was reminded of the fact that he who let such ambitions goad him into action, invariably departed this life ere a watch could tick a second.

Now, to the Apache Kid, in the fulness of his power, and playing a lone hand in the game of outlawry along the Mexican border, came luring accounts of a woman of wondrous beauty in a town a week's ride to the north.

At first the Kid had been indifferent, deeming the report in line with those of fabulous mountains of gold in desert infernos; but men continued to talk of "the girl at Hemper," and gradually his interest was aroused. Money he could secure by playing cards with men who were afraid to win from him, and killing had become more or less a routine. There remained only woman; and he was twenty-two.

Stage-drivers, off duty, are generally a garrulous set, and the Kid found one who had seen the girl at Hemper.

The driver was pleased to enlighten the youth, since he knew that young man's uncertain temper, and was aware the Kid had killed men for no known reason except "to see 'em kick."

"There's nothing like her in this country," the driver declared fervently. "She's sure somethin' you can rest your eyes on, Kid. I've seen pretty wimmin in my time, but she takes all bets. I saw her once in front of the hotel her uncle runs, and I says then, says I, 'There goes the finest-lookin' girl in Gawd-a'mighty's world.' Black hair, Kid, with a glisten to it, and a figger——"

The driver paused, unable to find words to express his rapturous thoughts.

"But," he went on finally, "it wasn't so much her fine looks as it was the way of her. Old as I be, with my hair wore down to the rind, that gal's way called to me like a chunk of gold in the sun. If I was a young man, I'd try to win her; and, if I died a-tryin', I wouldn't care. She is sure the kind that calls to a man, and I reckon there's many a man lookin' her way. But she's cold—cold as a diamond. Rich, too, and no scrub can get within speakin' distance of her."

"What's she doin' out here?" the Kid asked softly.

"Sick brother—con-sumpted, I guess, or leanin' toward it. Brought him out to get him cured up; jes' a boy. Well, I must be goin'."

The Kid leaned against an adobe building and considered the information given him by the driver. He admitted no interest, yet he was aware of a strange restlessness. That night he drifted north thirty miles, and the next day killed a Mexican in a monte-game dispute. The Kid was naturally irritable, and the strange restlessness had not tended to blunt the deadly fangs of his temper.

Again he mounted and drifted north some forty or fifty miles. In a little stage station on a bleak mesa, he met, face to face, the brother of a man he had killed in Arizona. The Kid frowned darkly, and the brother of the victim of the killer's lightning lead passed on to strengthen his nerves with strong waters.

Always did he have to kill men, thought the Kid peevishly. In time this brother of the man who had bowed to his lead would come, seeking satisfaction.

The Kid did not have long to wait. The man, maddened with vile whisky, charged from a doorway, firing as he advanced. The Kid's right gun barked briefly, and the man slumped to the ground.

That night the Kid rode forty miles, and a few days later sauntered into Chance Hardy's saloon, his fame preceding him.

Hardy accorded the youth with the rattlesnake jaw and restless, bloodshot eyes the utmost deference. The gambler's attitude deeply impressed certain officers of the law who looked to him for guidance in all matters. Then the Kid's appearance did not belie his fame. He looked "bad," and his glance was like a knife-thrust.

Hardy extended to the Kid the hospitality of his place. The youth, oddly enough, did not drink, but he was an inveterate gambler. Hardy steered him to the faro layout, signaling to the pasty-faced dealer to permit the visitor to win a reasonable amount.

The Kid was a nervous player, and demanded plenty of elbow-room. His deadly darting glances soon cleared a space around him; and, as he began to win, he smiled his curious, mirthless smile.

Suddenly he decided he had won enough, and cashed in. The eyes of every man in the saloon followed him as he sauntered to the door. He whirled on them with startling suddenness and, as one man, the watchers flinched. He smiled comprehension of their fears, and edged through the doorway.

"You'll have to let me go if the Kid comes back," the faro-dealer whined to Hardy. "I'd as soon deal to a rattler."

Uncle Charlie, in his chair on the hotel porch, saw the Kid approaching, and turned to Dora with more excitement than she had ever seen him display.

"Get up-stairs—quick, girl!" he puffed in heavy whispers.

"What is the matter with you, uncle?" she exclaimed, unable to see any cause for his intense excitement.

Then, before Uncle Charlie could answer, the Kid's spurs jingled on the steps, and the old man gripped the arms of his chair and stared fixedly at the intruder.

The girl saw an under-sized youth in his early twenties, bow-legged and slope-shouldered from years of riding. He was armed with two heavy, pearl-handled revolvers, but that struck her as nothing unusual. Since her arrival in Hemper she had seen many armed men. Her feminine mind, unschooled in the signs of deadliness, failed to note the murderous cruelty deep-etched in the face of the Apache Kid. To her he was merely some cowboy come to speak a few words to her uncle.

She suddenly became aware of a deathly stilness broken only by the jingle of the stranger's spurs as he deliberately approached her. She could see men across the street, and there was an odd intentness in their attitudes. She saw Hardy back of the breast-high swinging doors of his saloon; and he, too, was intently watching the youth who, to her annoyance, had halted close to her, and was staring down at her.

The Kid, having done as he pleased since boyhood, saw no reason why he should not tell this woman of rare beauty the purpose of his visit to Hemper.

"I come three hundred miles to see you," he told her, in a low expressionless voice, "and I don't think I'm goin' to leave this town loser."

* * *

UNCLE CHARLIE moved slightly, praying for the old Sharpe's and a dead rest. The Kid flashed him a glance of deadly warning. The old man's face turned a ghastly purple, and in his eyes came a look of dumb pathos. Old, slow and fat, he realized he was as helpless as an ox before this deadly youth whose smooth-hammered, triggerless guns hung within easy reach of his supple hands. It was not fear that held the landlord motionless in his chair, but his knowledge of the mental processes of killers, and the realization of his own helplessness. He knew that such as the Apache Kid struck swiftly at the slightest unusual move, and he felt that it would be sheer folly to throw his life away unless the Kid went beyond mere words.

For several moments the killer appraised the beauty of the girl; and then, in that same expressionless voice—

"I reckon I'm goin' to like you."

This was too much, even from a cowboy who might be a friend of her uncle. She arose, and being taller than the Kid, looked down at him haughtily; and then turned to her uncle.

"Uncle," she said in her coolest and most impersonal tone, "this man is annoying me. Will you please order him away."

The Kid lifted his upper lip in a wolf-like grin. It touched his vein of evil humor to imagine a fat, old man ordering him to do anything. He was half-tempted to kill the old man just to impress the girl. Uncle Charlie read that murderous thought in the dark face and twitching hands, and held himself motionless and mute.

Her uncle's failure to protect her hurt the girl, as well as sorely puzzled her. She would go to her room. She turned to enter the office, but the Kid blocked the way.

"Let me pass," she commanded, as though addressing some insolent servant.

This amused the Kid. She was a thoroughbred, and he would find much pleasure in taming her. Apparently she was unaware of the identity of the man she was addressing; therefore, to a certain extent, he would enlighten her.

"That old man over there," he said softly, darting an ophidian glance at Uncle Charlie. "Do you want to see that old man die?"

The girl grew sick with horror as she slowly comprehended the threat of ruthless murder his question carried. For the first time she glimpsed his perverted soul mocking her through dark, bloodshot eyes.

"Sit down, then," the Kid suggested, as an alternative likely to delay the demise of the fat old man.

She backed toward a chair and seated herself. The Kid came close to her, and one slim hand crept out and smoothed her hair. She shuddered at his touch, her eyes on his pearl-handled guns.

The Kid's hand strayed down her shoulder and arm, and closed about her wrist. He lifted her hand and examined the white, smooth fingers curiously; then his gaze focused on a ring she wore, a filigreed gold circlet set with a cluster of diamonds and rubies. In a childish mood he removed the ring and placed it on one of his own slim fingers.

"You must have plenty of dinero," he remarked, his mood now that of a simple savage playing with a gaud. "How much it cost?"

Dora was now fully aware that the man before her was more dangerous than a rattlesnake. Any moment the murderous mood might return; she must humor him. It was not a nightmare, but stark reality. A deadly stranger had threatened her uncle's life, and removed a ring from her finger. Her uncle had drifted away from her, and was now vague and remote. There were other men within call, but they seemed frozen, incapable of movement. She was alone—and helpless.

Never before had she faced the terrible fact of woman's helplessness. She was no stronger than Maria had been when the Paiute had roused her and drove her to her death. There had been a time, ages ago, when her woman's helplessness seemed a charming attribute. In that other world, where money ruled and police watched every corner, women prided themselves on their helplessness. In this world, where nothing counted save the ability to kill swiftly, there was no romance in helplessness, no charm in weakness. Here, despite her wealth, her refinement and culture, her mind infinitely superior to that of the creature before her, she was just a helpless woman.

And there was no man to whom she could turn for protection. Then suddenly a figure took form in the mirror of her mind, a sure, reliable, dominant being who was all that she was not. To that figure her thoughts turned with joyful relief. It came to her from some mystic source that that figure would stand between her and all danger. Yet she could not bring herself to name the figure. Pride held her back. She who had always been heart-free could not immediately bow to love; she who had remained quiescent, amused at the struttings of male egotists, indifferent to their love agonies, could not in one quick breath admit that danger had stirred love to call up the vision of the sure, reliable, dominant one.

"How much it cost?" impatiently repeated the Kid.

"Seven hundred dollars," she answered faintly.

The Kid examined the ring with renewed interest.

"A bunch of yearlin's in that," he muttered, marveling that so tiny a thing could be so valuable.

"How many hawses would it bring?" he queried, turning the ring on his finger.

"I can not tell you unless you tell me what horses cost," she replied, praying that he would take the ring and go.

"Say at fifty dollars a head."

"It would then bring fourteen horses," she calculated mechanically.

The Kid counted his fingers Indian-fashion.

"I'll keep it," he announced coolly.

Then the murderous mood returned, and he gave Uncle Charlie a malignant glance.

Placing a hand under the girl's chin, he tilted up her face, and, in a monotone as dry and deadly as the whirr of a rattler, he voiced his evil plan.

"Tomorrow you go south with me. I'll treat you right if you don't hang back. I come a long trail for you and I'm not goin' back alone."

He stepped back and stared at her with a concentrated deadliness that gave her the sensation of sinking, sinking, sinking. Though her lips were mute, her soul, frantic and utterly desperate, called—

"Norn, Norn, save me!"

It was done. Her soul had named the dominant figure of her visioning. Come sorrow, come agony, come death, she loved King Norn. Love and Hope came and drove back the shadows; Norn would protect her. In time he would forgive her, forget that prudish outburst, and stand between her and all danger. She smiled wanly, touched by the mystery of love.

She was mocking him, thought the Kid, noting her smile. She thought he had been speaking vain, empty words. Again he seriously considered killing the fat old man just to impress her. His gaze fastened on the heavy, inert figure in the big chair. He half-drew his right gun, and, in a vicious aside, snarled at the girl:

"You ain't said you'd go with me yet. Do I have to kill that old man now?"

"I'll go with you," she cried weakly, fully expecting to see her uncle shot.

The Kid lifted his upper lip in the wolf-like grin, and edged off the porch, satisfied that she was thoroughly intimidated, and that on the morrow she would, to save her uncle's life, ride south with him.

As the Apache Kid swung across the street, with his lurching, awkward rider's stride, the watchers drew back lest they attract his hostile attention. Hardy entered his little sanctum shaking with jealous rage against the Kid; but, when the killer entered the saloon, he found the gambler seemingly engrossed in business.

The moment the Kid passed through the swinging doors of the saloon, Uncle Charlie almost hurled himself from his chair, and dragged the girl into the office.

"Get up-stairs," he panted, "and lock yourself in. Here, wait, and take my six-shooter!"

Hurriedly he secured the heavy revolver and thrust it in her trembling hand, and pushed her toward the stairway.

"That was the Apache Kid!" he yelled, as he seized his old Sharpe's. "A killer who's as bad as a blind snake. He'll do as he says. Get to your room, girl, and stay there!"

Dumbly she obeyed him.

Uncle Charlie locked and barred the front door of the hotel. Then he waddled back and ordered Chang to hold the kitchen at all costs. From the kitchen he plunged into the alley back of the hotel and made his way, puffing and panting, to Meeker's store.

"We got to get some men together," he shouted at the storekeeper. "The Apache Kid's after my niece—swears he'll take her south with him."

"But he's a dangerous man," demurred Meeker.

"But you went out with me after Billy Snake," roared Uncle Charlie.

"Yes, I know; but that was just an Indian," Meeker side-stepped.

In a bull-like rage, Uncle Charlie stormed from the store, calling the storekeeper a "yellow dog" and a "prune-countin' skunk."

Bill Watson, the blacksmith, felt that the Apache Kid was out of his class.

"They say he's killed over twenty men," rumbled the blacksmith mournfully. "I'd jes' try to get him when he wasn't lookin', if I was you."

But the big iron-thumper carefully avoided volunteering to assist in ridding Hemper of the killer.

From man to man waddled Uncle Charlie, wheedling one, cursing another, but to no avail. He had supposed that the business men of the little town would turn out en masse, but he was wofully disappointed. Most of them that he approached had been chilled by Dora's indifference to their self-imagined charms, and felt no call to protect the girl. She was "stuck-up"; let her look after herself.

The landlord believed that an appeal to the lawless element controlled by Hardy would be a waste of breath. Dora had not told him of Hardy's proposal of marriage, and so he counted the gambler a friend and backer of the Kid.

So he went his weary, hopeless way, attempting to drum up a vigilance committee among the so-called respectables. But respectability, even in a lawless desert town, has a habit of carefully guarding its own precious hide. Respectability never won any wars or freed any slaves. The fighting is generally done by the men whom the respectables warn their wives against.

True, respectability had been represented in the posse that had taken the trail of the Indian, but, when Uncle Charlie went over the list, he found the lawless ones, the men without property, the partisans of Hardy, had formed the majority of that posse.

The old man returned to the hotel, crushed and beaten. But the feel of the old Sharpe's heartened him. He would fortify himself in the office, and defend his citadel to the best of his ability.

AS HE entered the saloon, the Kid signaled to Hardy that he desired speech with him. The gambler gave a sawed-off shotgun, reposing in the corner of his sanctum, a fleeting glance; but having no desire to die quickly, set his face in the gambler's mask, and obeyed the summons.

"I aim to tame that filly over there," the Kid announced, jerking his head in the direction of the hotel, "and I don't look for no one to set in on my game."

Back to wall, hands twitching close to low-hung guns, a restless, ursine swing to his head, the Kid was not a being to "my dear-fellow" into changing his mind, or to salve with flattery, or to reprove in the ringing tones of the stage hero.

Words, to the Apache Kid, were unimportant save when they heralded gun-talk. He had made his announcement not out of bravado, but to ascertain if there was a possibility of Hardy disapproving of his plan. If he caught the faintest hint of disapproval on the gambler's part, he would kill him, seize the girl and start for the border immediately.

The Kid was a first-class killer, but a poor poker-player. Hardy read his face as easily as he would the reflection of a card in a mirror. The gambler realized that he must say the right words in exactly the right way, or be shot down. Further, the gambler knew the psychology of fear. He knew that it was entirely possible for a man of the Kid's reputation to intimidate a whole town. To successfully attack this master gun-twirler, there would have to be a leader, ready and willing to die. Such a leader was not to be secured in Hemper, and the gun-fighters that might be bribed into daring the Kid's lead were in the desert, watching for an opportunity to seize the girl's brother.

The gambler's answer was toneless and impersonal.

"A man's woman is his own business," he said, flicking the ash from his cigar.

The Kid's searching gaze played recurrently across Hardy's mask-like face like flashes of sheet-lightning.

"A good way to look at it," darkly commented the killer.

Then he looked down at the ring, and held up his hand for Hardy to inspect the setting. But his right hand remained close to his gun.

"She give that to me." He attempted to grin with one corner of his mouth, his eyes half-closed. "She says it's wuth fourteen hawses. A right purty ring—hey, hombre?"

This strained the gambler's self-control close to the breaking-point. Volcanic rage seethed within him, and through a red haze the glittering ring mocked him. But he held himself steady, and no flicker of flame in his eyes gave hint of the storm of rage within him. He even essayed a smile as he lightly remarked—

"Nothin' like bein' a favorite with the ladies."

He pretended to admire the ring, his mind groping madly for some sure method of blotting out the man who had so calmly muddled his plans. If the gang captured the boy, it was plain that he could not marry the girl until the Kid was out of the way. Then there was Norn to be considered. While the rancher evidently had no interest in the girl, he would hold himself responsible for the boy's safety. With the Kid blocking the way, Norn would have time to ascertain that the gang had captured the boy, and immediately conclude that they were holding the lad for ransom. Norn would then come directly to him, knowing that he controlled the gang, and that meant gun-smoke.

The gambler's attitude of indifference seemed to satisfy the Kid, for he resumed his bucking of the faro game, much to the sweating agitation of the dealer Hardy had neglected to relieve. But never for a moment did the killer relax his distrustful vigilance. He insisted that the rear of the saloon be kept clear of men, and his ever-restless eyes traveled from lay-out to doors, from doors to the faces of the men lounging against the bar, and back to the lay-out.

Hardy, once, was on the point of snatching up the sawed-off shotgun, and taking the long chance; but he could not quite free his soul of the awe of the Kid's red record. Then a hanger-on slipped in, and, pretending to ask for money, managed to whisper to the gambler:

"The Kid's goin' to take the girl south with him tomorrow. Uncle Charlie's penned himself in, and turnin' everybody back."

Hardy gave the hanger-on a coin and waved him away.

This, thought the gambler, did not help matters. To force the girl to marry him, he would have to tell her of her brother's peril. Now, Uncle Charlie, having noted his friendly relations with the Kid, would not permit him within speaking distance of the girl. While the Kid might brave the thunder of the old Sharpe's, the gambler admitted that he had no stomach for facing the buffalo gun. Even if he could get to the girl, there was the Kid still blocking his game. Therefore, the Apache Kid must die ere the dawn broke.

Perhaps the killer would relax his vigilance; then one desperate move, and both barrels of the shotgun. But he must wait until he had a perfect drop on the killer. If the Kid caught him reaching for the shotgun, the gun-master would kill him as he had a score of men, within the space of a split second. To be sure, he must have the gun cocked and on the man before discovered. Even then he was doubtful of his ability to pull the triggers before the Kid's magic guns flashed into action. And there was no record of the Kid ever having missed a man.

While the Kid toyed with faro, a town character, known as "Sunshine," entered the saloon, stopped short at the end of the bar, and stared fascinatedly at the killer.

Some men twitted Sunshine concerning the big, rusty revolver he carried in a rawhide holster. At first the Kid moved nervously under the gawkish stare of the huge but harmless Sunshine. Then the killer noted that the big man was the butt of various humorous remarks and classified him as harmless.

Sunshine did not intrude on the Kid, but moved from one point of vantage to another, staring at him with round rabbit eyes, fascinated by the killer's deadliness. The stare of the harmless Sunshine amused the watchers; even the Kid lifted his upper lip in his wolf-like grin.

"Your head's open," bantered the killer. "Look out for flies."

At this sally the watchers laughed as courtiers laugh at the mildewed jest of a king; but Sunshine continued to stare, his face empty as that of a hypnotist's subject.

The laughter of the watchers caused the Kid to unbend further. Playfully he beckoned Sunshine to him. The big man came with heavy, dragging steps. The Kid relieved him of his big gun, and made a futile attempt to turn the rusty, empty cylinder. Then he blew cigaret smoke in the muzzle; and, with one lightning move, tossed the gun back into the rawhide holster. Sunshine looked down at his gun with the blank astonishment of a country yokel in whose hat a magician has discovered a setting of eggs.

CHAPTER X

NORN considered the cañon a safe playground for Dickie. The lad, on the old and cautious pony, could go no farther than the first waterfall; and only an experienced and resourceful rider could negotiate any of the narrow game-trails that zigzagged skyline-ward. Thus, when Dickie rode away that balmy afternoon, the rancher felt no misgivings. The lad would return in an hour or two.

When Dickie had disappeared in the willows and cottonwoods that hid the stream from view, Norn resolved to inspect his young apple orchard that set on some high land back from the Hemper road.

As he rode through the young trees, the rancher was puzzled to note that some riders had recently crossed his orchard. He questioned the necessity of riding through the plowed ground when there was a hard road between the ranch road and the orchard. He found that the mysterious riders, had, on exiting from the orchard, turned toward the ranch, and then doubled back through the orchard. Gradually black suspicion began to form in his mind. Members of the gang were prowling over his ranch. Why? Had they decided to break the old truce?

The rancher circled the orchard and returned to the ranch-house. Desert Jack reported that Dickie had not returned. Norn decided to ascertain if the mysterious riders had invaded his cañon, and at the same time, assure himself of the boy's safety. He did not take the cañon road, but followed a narrow trail along a big ditch that tapped the stream at the falls.

Pete had several reasons for sending Pedro, the only Mexican in the gang, into the cañon. The Mexican had worked on round-up for Norn, and, at times, had been given permission to hunt on the big ranch. Thus, Pedro was most familiar with the trails that led down the sides of the cañon. If the Mexican were discovered by Norn, Pete reasoned, the rancher's suspicions would not be aroused so quickly as they would if he found a white man lurking in his cañon. Then, Pete believed, the Mexican could be trusted to do as he was told. Pete knew that Pedro stood in awe of his anger, and was confident that the Mexican would not dare to play a crooked game.

Pedro dragged his horse down a trail that a goat would hesitate to follow, and struck the floor of the cañon a short distance below the waterfall. He concealed his horse in some alders and proceeded to watch the road.

Norn, screened from the Mexican's view by the trees and undergrowth, rode up to the waterfall. There, he turned into the cañon road and began searching for fresh tracks of Dickie's pony. Apparently the boy had not come to the falls. The rancher dismounted and led his horse some distance down the road, studying the old tracks. Suddenly his eye caught the movement of some creature in the alders. He slipped back and secured his saddle-gun. Venison was always welcome. With the utmost caution he approached the alders.

The Mexican was intently watching the road beyond him, and, when Norn spoke to him, he sprang to his feet chattering like a startled monkey.

For a time the rancher studied the shaking Pedro, and then abruptly ordered—

"Drop your rifle!"

The Mexican promptly obeyed. Norn relieved him of his six-shooter and knife.

"Now," demanded the rancher, with a deadly, dominating note in his voice, "why are you in my cañon?"

The Mexican began babbling about hunting, but Norn silenced him.

"You did not come to the house and secure my permission. You slipped into the cañon like a coyote. Did you expect to find deer in the road? Why should I not kill you as I would a coyote?"

The Mexican resumed his babbling.

"Don Keeng" was a generous man who had no thought for one little deer. "Don Keeng" was also a man with many things on his mind, and must not be disturbed by a man merely desiring to hunt on "this magnificent ranch."

But Pedro's babbling was wasted on the rancher.

"Walk ahead of me," Norn ordered.

He drove the Mexican back to his horse. There he secured a rope, and presently Pedro was bound hand and foot.

Norn then took the cleaning-rod from its hiding-place in the butt of his gun, and carefully screwed it together. His next move was to build a little fire.

As he laid the cleaning-rod in the fire, he observed with quiet assurance:

"This will make you speak the truth, Pedro. In a little while you will have a taste of hell."

Norn knew every twist and turn of the Mexican mind. If the gang had broken the old truce and was plotting some sort of devilment, this was an excellent opportunity to get first-hand information.

The possible capture of Dickie by the gang did not enter his mind. The boy was probably at the ranch-house now. The rancher was thinking of his herds. Was the gang about to exact tribute from him? If so, he must prepare for war. He had no intention of burning the Mexican, for he was confident that Pedro would speak the truth when he felt the iron's hot breath.

Pedro, on the other hand, had only the capture of the boy in mind. He had been watching Norn's every move with terror-widened eyes. When the rancher placed the iron in the fire, he sucked in his breath. Ah, the torture! Mother of God, who could endure the fire torture!

Norn pulled off the Mexican's boots. Then he examined the iron and thrust it back in the flames.

"Not hot enough," he observed distinctly, for Pedro's benefit.

When the iron was red-hot, Norn suddenly jerked it from the flames and savagely approached the Mexican.

Pedro's soul sickened as he felt the hot breath of the iron.

"Speak the truth, thou dog," gritted Norn in Spanish, "or walk through hell."

"By the cross, the truth I speak!" howled the frantic Mexican. "The brother of the beautiful señorita is sought by Pete that Señor Hardy may give to each man much gold."

Norn stopped short, and then, tossing aside the iron, swiftly unbound the Mexican and hurled him toward his horse.

"To the ranch," he snapped; and Pedro, gray with fear, galloped ahead of him.

The Mexican knew that he could not now return to the gang. Pete would not listen to explanations. His safety lay in keeping close to Norn.

Norn, as he rode even with him, read the Mexican's thoughts.

"You will stay at my place, Pedro," he said. "Your friends would kill you if I sent them word that Pedro answered when the little hot iron spoke to him. Is it not the part of wisdom to be my man?"

"*Si, señor*," the Mexican quickly agreed, breathing heavily, "it is the part of wisdom."

"Then I will forget what has passed, and will say that Pedro had my permission to hunt in the cañon."

THE rancher had not neglected to watch the road, and, when they came to the place where Dickie had turned down the stream, his sharp eyes discerned the tell-tale hoof-prints in the mud. Perhaps one of the gang had intercepted the boy, and either inveigled or forced him to ride down the stream. He spurred up his horse, and, with Pedro galloping ahead, dashed back to the ranch-house.

Placing Pedro in charge of Desert Jack, Norn hurriedly told the foreman of the Mexican's confession.

"You'll stay here," the rancher planned. "Joe and the other three boys will go to the Bundy camp at Witch-talk and wait for me. It's getting dark right now, and no moon for trailing. I'll go to Hemper for more men. Tell the boys to search Big Wash, but to show no lights. I should join them before dawn. Tell them to scout, but to steer clear of a fight. When I join them, we'll comb the country north to the desert hills, and guard the water-holes. I'll send you word when we establish a main camp."

Norn secured his two made-to-order six-shooters, sweet weapons and perfectly balanced, and exchanged his saddle-gun for a heavy hunting-rifle.

The four men under Desert Jack's orders, were soon ready for the trail, heavily armed and prepared for any desert emergency.

Norn mounted his spotted horse, which he reserved for long rides, and racked down the Hemper road.

It was plain, thought Norn, that Hardy, knowing the girl's wealth, expected a heavy ransom for the boy. There could be no other motive. Certainly the gambler would not expect to win the girl's favor by such methods. Yet, if the gang held the boy, Hardy would be in a position to demand almost any sacrifice of the lad's sister. Whatever his motive, the gambler must be placed under guard and held as hostage for Dickie's safety.

To save the girl much unnecessary anguish, as well as to avoid the reproach she would surely heap upon him for his lax guardianship of her brother, Norn decided to exact a promise of silence from Uncle Charlie until they had made every possible effort to wrest Dickie from the clutches of the gang.

As Norn rode into Hemper he noted that Hardy's saloon was ablaze with light, but that the Hemper House was as dark as a tomb. He tossed the reins over the pinto's head and vaulted the rail at the end of the porch. Immediately Uncle Charlie challenged him.

"It's Norn—Norn!" the rancher answered impatiently. "Open up."

Uncle Charlie admitted the rancher, and, before Norn could tell him of Dickie, the old man began cursing the Apache Kid.

"Talk straight," the rancher remonstarted. "Calm yourself."

The landlord finally managed to give a clear account of the events of the afternoon.

"And," he concluded, "the murderin' devil says he'll take my girl south with him in the mornin'."

A white figure, unseen by the men, stole down the stairway.

"Then," said Norn, in a matter-of-fact tone, "there is nothing left to do but stop this Apache Kid."

"That's it—that's it," the old man eagerly assented. But a thought of the Kid's record made him add nervously: "You'll have to use your head, King. The Apache Kid is quicker than death itself. I think we'd better try gettin' the girl out of town."

"No," Norn firmly objected. "Will you let some cow-thief drive you to that?"

"But I'm old and slow," groaned Uncle Charlie. "Lord, man, what can I do?"

"Stay here, and stand guard. I'll take a chance on the Apache Kid."

Norn now thought to tell Uncle Charlie of Dickie, but, ere he could speak, Dora glided over and touched his arm. The rancher whirled and the movement brought him close to her.

"You must not risk your life for me," she softly pleaded. "I overheard Uncle's suggestion. If you will assist me, I can escape. Dickie can follow later."

The rancher flinched inwardly when she mentioned Dickie, but made no reply. He could not tell her of the danger that threatened her brother, and it was not his nature to discuss a man he was soon to view through gun-smoke.

His silence told her that her pleading had been in vain. Her hands were now clutching both his arms. Must she make the final appeal? Must she tell him that she had more fear for his safety than for her own?

"I do not want you to go," she murmured so faintly that he was forced to bend his head and ask her to repeat the words.

"I do not want you to go," she repeated; and there was no mistaking the warm, tender note in her voice.

Norn's heart leaped madly. He wanted to sweep her to his breast, to release the pent-up flood of tenderness in his heart. But he held himself quiescent, fearful that she was laboring under a mere passing emotion. He so intensely desired her love that he dared not show a glimmer of true sentiment, lest he meet with that indifference that had wrecked the hopes of so many men. She must come to him calm and unharrowed with emotion, and give him the sign that symboled her heart's desire. He would not pursue, he would not babble madly. Her love must flower naturally.

Gently he drew away from her and started toward the door.

"Oh," she exclaimed, desperately, "why can you not see——"

"See what?" he asked, halting abruptly.

Training, pride, the idea that the woman must wait, wait, wait until the man speaks, held back the words she yearned to say—three little words, "I love you."

Then, though her hands groped toward him, he backed swiftly through the door, and was gone.

Norn did not forget that he was about to battle with a first-class gunman, and was fully aware that the Kid could, under ordinary conditions, shade the gun-play of any man in the desert country. But he had decided not to approach the killer under ordinary conditions.

With feigned carelessness, he approached the swinging doors of the saloon, and paused for a breath to locate his man. He saw the Apache Kid lounging against the wall. In the center of the saloon, and even with the Kid, stood the gaping Sunshine, staring at the killer.

Norn entered swiftly.

"You, Sunshine," he shouted, with well-feigned rage, "what do you mean by stealing my horse?"

Poor Sunshine, stunned by the accusation and chilled with fear, could only blink and gape.

Norn advanced a pace, and pulled his guns. This movement caused the Kid to face the seemingly angry man and to drop his hands on the butts of the low-hung guns. Then, realizing that it was not his affair, he relaxed, pleasantly anticipating bloodshed. The killer's hands dropped away from his gun butts. He took out his book of cigaret-paper. The fool had stolen a horse and would soon die.

Hardy was deeply puzzled. Why should Norn, the silent and dignified, stoop to frightening a town fool? Other watchers grinned. Norn was merely indulging in a little sport. Norn smiled bleakly. Yes, that was it; the rancher was having a little fun with Sunshine. Even the Kid saw through the dramatic gun-play, and frowned disappointedly. He had hoped to witness a killing.

"Can you dance?" rasped Norn. "Say, you Sunshine, can you dance?"

The big yokel essayed a few ox-like steps.

"Not fast enough," yelled Norn, cocking his guns.

The Kid, lounging against the wall, grinned at the clumsiness of Sunshine. The fool was surely frightened out of what little wits he possessed.

"Dance faster," insisted Norn; then, in one swift, sure movement, he swung his guns from Sunshine to the Kid and released the smooth hammers.

In the infinitesimal fraction of a second required for the lead to speed from the guns to his body, the Kid caught Norn's cold eye glittering across the gleaming barrels. Automatically, the killer's hands sought his guns, but the lead shut off the nerve connection between brain and hands ere the fingers could close on the weapons.

The Apache Kid slumped against the wall, slid to a sitting posture and then toppled over.

Norn holstered one gun and leaped to the side of the killer.

He rolled the body over with his foot and pulled Dora's ring from the slim finger that would never again circle a gun-butt.

Sunshine, as Norn's guns exploded, gave a good imitation of an insane kangaroo. He dodged and plunged, and tossed his arms, and finally dived under a card-table. Up he rose, carrying the table with him, in a wild stampede for the back door. Striking the door, he fought the table for a breath, dropped it, and gyrated like a whirling dervish through the door. In the alley, he launched himself forward; and, striking barrels and boxes, crashed through them like a frenzied bull. At last he got clear of the obstructions and passed up the alley in wild flight, howling at every jump. He ran until exhausted, and only slunk back to the town when he had, after much laborious examination of his body, assured himself that he was not mortally wounded.

Hardy had been a puzzled spectator of the baiting of Sunshine; but, as Norn's guns spoke and the Kid slumped, the audacious generalship of the rancher stunned the gambler, who had been trying in vain to think of some way to get the drop on the Kid. He saw Norn bend over the body, but the roulette-wheel prevented his seeing the rancher strip the ring from the dead man's finger. Then, ere he could fathom all the rancher's motives, he found himself staring into those same guns that had sent the Kid to his long sleep.

"Hands up!" Norn ordered sharply.

The gambler read death in Norn's glance, and his hands shot ceilingward.

THE watchers did not interfere, though, at that moment, there were many Hardy partisans in the room. Norn had killed the Apache Kid, and no one now dared to dispute his will.

Norn holstered one gun, and, slipping back of the gambler, proceeded to disarm him.

"To the hotel," Norn ordered in a low voice.

The gambler, feeling the pressure of a gun-barrel against his spine, marched as ordered—across the street and on to the hotel porch.

Norn now proposed to tell Uncle Charlie of the danger that threatened Dickie, and turn Hardy over to the old man as hostage for the boy.

Dora and her uncle had heard the shooting, and were on the porch as Hardy and Norn came up. The girl could hardly repress the prayer of thankfulness that rose to her lips. She had heard the shots, but the intimate details of the passing of the Apache Kid were not within the range of her woman's imagination. She could only comprehend that Norn was unhurt.

Uncle Charlie noted Hardy's raised hands, but asked no questions. He held the buffalo gun at the ready and waited for Norn to speak.

To Norn the ring symbolized his ability to encircle the girl with his protection. Holding a gun on Hardy, he fumbled in his shirt-pocket for the ring. Yet he refrained from even a hint of heroics, and quietly said—

"Here's your ring, Miss Dora."

The girl's imagination then caught a glimpse of the action required to take that ring from the Apache Kid. Inwardly she shuddered at the thought of taking that which had encircled a dead man's finger, but the realization that the ring was a symbol of Norn's willingness to risk his life in her defense outweighed her qualms, and she stepped toward him, hand outstretched. This move placed her even with Hardy, whose right hand swiftly descended on her shoulder and hurled her against Norn.

In two bounds the desperate gambler had reached the end of the porch and cleared the rail. Uncle Charlie, slow and heavy, swung his Sharpe's, but Hardy had mounted Norn's horse before the old man could get the buffalo gun in action.

Uncle Charlie made a mighty effort to reach the rail, but crashed into a rocking-chair and went down, cursing and roaring. In some fashion the old Sharpe's was discharged and the great slug whizzed across the street, passed through the front of the saloon, struck one of the big hanging lamps, passed through the back wall, and then through a covered wagon, missing by a hand's-breadth the occupant thereof, who was sleeping off a day's debauch.

The mysterious shot created a panic in the saloon and there followed a blind rush for the doors. The killing of the Kid and the forced departure of Hardy had touched the nerves of the habitués of the saloon. Suspicion and old hates flamed up in the mad scramble. A half-intoxicated man jerked out his gun and began firing. The chimneyless lamp blazed up and the sagging cheesecloth ceiling caught fire. The fighting, struggling men at both doors now had no thought save to escape.

The jam at the front door finally broke, and its component parts separated and lurched and stumbled into the street. By this time the fire had gained such headway that those who had stampeded so blindly from the inferno could only turn and dumbly stare at the flames. Then it occurred to one of the watchers that the whole town might burn, and he raised a wild cry of "Fire! Fire! Fire!" This stirred the paralyzed ones into activity, and the street was soon full of excited men, rushing hither and thither, bawling conflicting orders and acting not unlike a drove of frantic cattle.

Norn was near the edge of the porch when Hardy hurled the girl into his arms. One of her hands struck down his gun and she fell heavily against him. To save himself, he staggered down the steps, carrying her with him. Before he could disengage himself from her clutching hands, and run around the porch, Hardy was through the cottonwoods and speeding toward the desert.

The bedlam in the saloon, following the bellow of Uncle Charlie's rifle, checked Norn at the end of the porch. He returned to the girl to witness the stampede. Then, as the flames gained headway in the dry shell, he realized that he could not now expect the men of Hemper to join him in the search for Dickie. The town was in confusion, and a posse friendly to him and the landlord could not be raised until the Hemperites had regained some semblance of calmness. Also, Uncle Charlie's account of his unsuccessful attempt to enlist a vigilance committee to dispose of the Apache Kid indicated that the raising of a posse to take the trail of the gang would be a difficult matter, even under normal conditions.

Uncle Charlie, having fought the rocker to a draw, began bellowing that the whole street was doomed.

Men came running with buckets and made some attempt to save the saloon, but they soon fell back to concentrate their efforts on the hotel side of the street.

Uncle Charlie summoned his help and formed a small bucket brigade which kept the front of the hotel drenched with water.

Norn was loath to leave the girl while the fire raged, and waited until assured that the hotel was safe. As he watched the fire, he became aware of the girl's close presence and felt her hand slip into his.

"It was very foolish of me to accuse you of deceiving poor little Maria," she hurriedly unburdened her heart, fearful that he would plunge into action before she could voice her regret. "Will you forgive me?"

"I guess this side of the street is safe now," he observed, pretending not to have heard her.

"Yes; I guess so," she murmured forlornly; and slowly withdrew her hand.

Then Uncle Charlie came and insisted that the girl seek the safe seclusion of the Indians' cabin at the rear of the hotel.

When the old man had departed with Dora, Norn decided to postpone telling him of Dickie. Hardy was, doubtless, in the desert now, and, when he heard of the destruction of his saloon, would not hesitate to recoup his loss by demanding a staggering ransom for the boy. The situation, Norn concluded, called for immediate action, and he resolved to take the trail with what men he had. He would do all in his power to recover the boy, and, if he failed, he would then send a man to town to summon aid. By the time he and his men, now waiting at Witch-talk, had thoroughly scouted the desert basin, the friendly Hemperites might be induced to listen to an appeal for help.

Norn found the proprietor of the hardware store, and quickly purchased a rifle and ammunition. At the stage stable, the rancher grumbled at the inferiority of the horse he was forced to accept, doubting that the animal would last until he recovered his faithful pinto.

Cautiously Norn rode into the desert. Hardy might double back and ambush him, since the gambler had not only the tireless pinto but the heavy hunting-rifle left hanging on the saddle.

CHAPTER XI

BUNDY, as he began to reason calmly, realized that he could not hope to reach Hemper in time for the doctor to save him from an agonizing death. He might, however, be able to get to Norn's ranch. But the problem was to reach the ranch without being sighted by the gang. He knew that Pete and his men were now at Twenty-eight Palms, and that he could not slip past their camp before dawn. Even if he turned the boy over to the gang, he could not escape the charge of treachery. They would instantly deduce that it was the snake venom in his veins that had brought him back to them, and no desire to play fair. Also, no member of the gang possessed any antidote for snakebite. He had much to lose and nothing to gain by returning to the gang.

Despite the desperateness of his situation, the man's mind was not solely occupied with selfish thoughts. Vaguely, it now came to him, that had he not been bitten by the snake, he would not have carried out his program, but would have eventually taken Dickie to the Norn ranch. The lad had roused some latent parental instinct in the man, and he found himself considering Dickie's welfare with a greater concern that he accorded the ever-increasing pain in his hand and arm.

With some difficulty he saddled the horses and led the way up a tributary of the cañon, finally coming out on the main ridge of the desert range.

Halting to adjust the tourniquet, he told Dickie his plans.

"We'll strike along this ridge till we come to Tunnel Cañon. There's water at the head of it, and generally a hatful of water in the old tunnel near the mouth. We'll then go on to Norn's ranch. How you feelin', kid?"

"Pretty good, thank you," Dickie bravely assured him, though stiff and sore, and exhausted from the strain on his nerves.

"Game as they make 'em," mumbled Bundy, fighting back a curious drowsiness.

They moved on. Bundy found himself bending over the saddle horn. The ground seemed a bed of black velvet that offered to him heavenly repose. Only with the utmost effort could he hold himself erect in the saddle. He wanted to slump, to surrender.

Then came the strange sensation of his body being attached to the arm instead of the arm to the body. The body was cold and the arm aflame. The body seemed small and shriveled, the arm huge and bursting with blood.

Then, the drowsiness rushed his faculties, and he found himself seated on the ground, with Dickie tugging at his shoulder, and whimpering:

"You said you must get to a doctor, or you'd die. Please don't die—please don't die."

The man lurched to his feet and managed to get into the saddle.

"Keep me movin', son," he mumbled, thickly. "Keep me movin'."

With the venom raging in his arm, Bundy's course up the ridge was erratic and punctuated with frequent halts.

At times the fear of agonizing death gripped the vitals of the man and he cursed wildly to revive his sinking courage, but through his curses ran a thin note of despair.

"We can't make it," he blubbered; and almost fell from his horse.

The animal halted abruptly, expecting his rider to dismount.

Bundy sprawled over the saddle horn and slid to the ground.

"Go on," he yelled hoarsely to the boy who had quickly dismounted. "I'm done."

While Bundy could stand hardship, endure hunger and thirst, his mind could not rise free and clear above the sharp, subtle workings of the venom. Fatalistic thought dominated him, and threw wide the gates of his physical being to the poison. Had he firmly held to the idea that his blood was clean and pure, he would have, no doubt much lessened the pressure that aided the venom on its work. But he surrendered, his mind black with snake-thoughts, poison-thoughts, death-thoughts. His mind invited the venom to do its worst and thus he succumbed far more quickly than he would had his every thought been against the idea of surrender.

"Go on!" he repeated hopelessly. "I'm done—mountain over there—go on—go on."

Dickie, his childishness burned out by the fires of harsh experience, put his arms about the man, and strove to push him toward his horse.

"Hurry," panted the boy. "You are very sick and must get to a doctor."

Bundy sat down abruptly, mumbling——

"No use—no use."

"Get up," Dickie screamed. "You told me to keep you moving. Don't you see I'm helping you—don't you understand?"

But the man did not move.

The boy now realized that pleadings were in vain. He must keep the man moving—but how? Perhaps insult would stir the huge, inert hulk before him. He could think of nothing but the small boy anathema of——

Cowardly, cowardly custard,
Ate a cup of mustard.

This he shrilled close to Bundy's ear, and its effect was magical.

The boy was calling him a coward—a small, sickly boy was calling him, Rat Bundy, leader of men, a coward. His mind threw aside its black incubus of death-thoughts. What was a nip from a rattler? Nothing. He was strong and his blood was pure. He would survive. He rose to his feet, jaws set, and mounted his horse.

Dickie never knew the terrible effort it cost Bundy to hold his mind to the thought of survival. The man now sat in his saddle, rigidly erect, fighting battle after battle against the insidious venom. He was determined now to reach the mouth of Tunnel Cañon, from which point the boy could plainly see the green fields of Norn's ranch.

Noble thoughts for the boy's safety strengthened him. He found that such thoughts kept his mind clear, and that thoughts of self confused his sense of direction, and weakened his resistance.

The tributary that led into Tunnel Cañon was clogged with cat-claws that forced them to dismount and lead their horses.

The man, holding firmly to the resolve to guide the boy to safety, floundered through the implacable cat-claw, oblivious to its cruel hooked thorns. But when they entered Tunnel Cañon, the old thoughts charged the citadel of his resolve, and he slumped down in the sand, his shirt in tatters, his face, hands and chest bleeding from countless scratches. Dickie had fared much better; the man had broken a trail for him.

The lad now saw that the man was again losing courage, and he repeated the small-boy anathema which brought Bundy to his feet, cursing himself for a spineless quitter. And once more he mounted his horse, with the venom singing a song of blind hate in his veins.

Tunnel Cañon, though its walls were abrupt, was spacious and smooth-floored. The ponies racked on freely, Dickie leading the way.

"Look fer tunnel—left-hand side," Bundy warned, not quite sure that he was in the right cañon.

Then suddenly Dickie discerned a black blot in the cañon wall, and veered over a little.

"Here's the tunnel!" he joyously exclaimed. "We're all right now."

"Keep goin'," the man groaned, as he rode even with the boy. "Keep goin'."

THERE was now a pallid hint of dawn in the eastern sky. The worn and weary lad sniffed the aromatic dawn-scents, and felt his spirits revive. Soon would come the kindly sunlight, and all would be well.

When they reached the mouth of Tunnel Cañon, Rain-maker had emerged from the gloom, and stood, wreathed in shimmering haze.

"There's the ranch!" shouted Dickie. "See the trees and the house? That's it—that's it."

But the habit of resistance had now

gained a foothold in the mind of the man. They were in sight of the ranch, and there he could at least secure whisky which was supposed to counteract the effect of rattlesnake venom. He would fight his way through. The boy would not again have to remind him that he was a coward.

He might have ridden on without a break, had he not thought to examine his hand and arm in the clear morning light. The swelling gave his courage a severe setback. He sagged forward, and his horse promptly halted. He slid from the saddle, and stood, his arms hanging over the horse's neck, a hopeless, sodden figure of despair.

"Come on, please hurry," Dickie began pleading.

"There's the ranch," Bundy said mournfully. "Go to it. I'm sick—sick——"

"I'll stay with you, then," the boy calmly decided. "I won't leave you."

Huh, thought the man, the kid was a real friend who wouldn't leave him to die like a poisoned wolf, alone and forsaken. The boy was game, and he, a man was giving up, surrendering while he yet had strength. He managed to heave himself into the saddle.

Dickie led the way across Big Wash, and up to the ranch-house. Bundy, now that he had reached the end of the terrible trail, slumped completely and would have fallen from the horse had not Desert Jack caught him in his strong arms.

"He took me from some men and brought me home," quickly vouchsafed Dickie, true to his promise. Then, in answer to a puzzled exclamation from Desert Jack, he excitedly poured forth a torrent of words.

"Big rattlesnake bit him—I cut his finger—then I sucked the blood out—then he was going to die—and then——"

"You look purty peaked yourself, kid," interrupted the foreman, as he beckoned to Pedro. "Go to the house and lie down."

Dickie rode up to the porch and dismounted. Now that he was free of all responsibility, weariness overpowered him, and it required a desperate effort for him to reach the big divan in the living-room. There he sprawled out, and fell into the dreamless sleep of one who has fought a good fight and won. And, to the end, he kept his pact with Bundy.

With Pedro's assistance, Desert Jack half-carried Bundy to the bunk-house. The foreman deeming whisky a sovereign remedy for snakebite, forced great swallows of the raw liquor down Bundy's throat. Then, calling on the Chinese servants for assistance, he bound up Bundy's hand and arm in raw beef.

"You'd better hit fer town, Pedro," Desert Jack told the Mexican, when they had finished poulticing Bundy's arm. "Get Doc Cunningham out here on the jump."

Then the foreman thought of Norn's orders. The rancher would hold him responsible for any treachery on the Mexican's part. But Pedro was the only available man. A Chinese could not be trusted away from a house. Also, the boy was safe, and the holding of Pedro now was of no importance.

As the Mexican turned to go, Desert Jack warned him that "a quick killin" would be the reward "fer any greaser tricks."

The foreman stood in the doorway of the bunk-house, rifle in hand, and watched the Mexican depart. Then he returned to the pouring of whisky down the throat of the hapless Bundy.

Bundy, in his way, had always been far more considerate of the Mexican's feelings than had Pete or any of the other desert rovers who classified "greasers" with Indians and negroes. The Mexican was not a stranger to gratitude.

Desert Jack's warning was unnecessary. In his heart of hearts, the Mexican was weary of the rather lonely life his color had forced him to lead. He was a member of the gang, but none of the white men, barring Bundy, had ever shown him a gleam of kindness, or counseled with him. He would slip into Hemper, find the doctor, and then flee north, far beyond the gang's reach. In sweet San Gabriel he would find his own people, a guitar to strum, and a dark-eyed woman to make time pass quickly. Aye, he was fortunate to escape from the hated gringos, the ever-restless ones, the seekers of trouble.

Though he gave a grunt of astonishment at the havoc the fire had wrought, Pedro, as he entered Hemper, did not pause to inspect the smoking ruins, but trotted past the hotel intent on reaching the doctor's office. He reined in abruptly as he caught a glimpse of the doctor coming out of the drug-store, and hailed the medico just as he paused at the hotel steps to speak to Dora.

"Bundy heem get snakebite. You go queek Norn ranch."

"All right," snapped the doctor. "I'll start right away."

The Mexican, having paid his debt of gratitude to Bundy, galloped around the hotel, and the desert country knew him no more.

Pedro's display of graceful horsmanship, as he dashed past, attracted the girl's attention, and she vaguely recalled fragments of his speech to the doctor.

"Snakebite—Norn ranch."

Some men, poking in the ashes of the ruins, shouted to the doctor as he past sped in his buckboard.

Then, the thought that Dickie might have been bitten by a rattlesnake plunged into her mind with terrifying suddenness. The doctor was now beyond hailing distance, and she ran into the hotel to tell Uncle Charlie of her fears.

While Dora had slept a few hours, the old man had guarded his property all night, with no thought of sleep. Now he was preparing to give his old body the rest it demanded, and was in no mood to be alarmed by unfounded forebodings.

"Don't be foolish, Dora," he grumbled, as he tugged at his shoes. "If Dickie was bit they'd bring him in on the jump. You don't suppose that Doc Cunningham wouldn't tell you if it was the boy that was nipped? I swear, Dora, you're like most wimmin—always a-borrowin' trouble. Holy cripes, I never put in such a night in my life! Now run along and let me sleep."

"But, uncle," she persisted, "it might be Dickie. You know he is so daring and impetuous."

"Well, Doc Cunningham ought to be back in a few hours and then you'll know. Now let me sleep."

Slowly Dora returned to the porch. An hour dragged by and then she saw one of the stage stable helpers start up the street.

"Bring my horse, please," she called to the helper; and hurried upstairs to don her riding-habit.

Later, as she cantered down the desert road, she amused herself with picturing Dickie's surprise when she rode up to the ranch. Her forebodings, she now realized, had arisen from loneliness. Dickie had been gone a long time, it seemed to her, and she was merely lonesome.

The lad would have many stories to tell her, and Norn would bring them back to town.

Hers was a mind that rarely long entertained disagreeable thoughts or memories. She was on her way to Dickie now, and would, doubtless, see the man she loved.

Also, she had a good feminine excuse for invading Norn's little empire. She would tell him, calmly and without the quiver of an eyelash, she had heard that some one at the ranch had been bitten by a snake, and that she had come to make sure the unfortunate was not Dickie. Then Norn would show her the ranch, and in the quiet balmy evening they would return to town.

She admitted a childish curiosity regarding the man's surroundings and manner of living. Did he possess all those things of which Uncle Charlie had hinted, books, rich furniture, piano and servants.

Now that she loved a man, she found she could not reason calmly and lucidly. Her mind toyed with pleasant externals and refused to consider primitive facts.

The Apache Kid, Hardy, the fire, were now vague memories falling back into the shadows of obscurity before the irresistible advance of love and hope.

SHE was in the Springtime of youth, the day was matchless, and her powerful horse was bearing her swiftly to her twin loves.

Of course the man had never spoken a word of love to her, but that did not matter. He might resist for a time, but would finally bow as she had bowed to the immutable law. She smiled as she thought of any man attempting to resist the law of love—the law that governed the universe.

She surrendered to tender thoughts of Norn. What a restless being he was, ever in action. Yet all his deeds sprang from his great unselfishness. He had no thought of self, no small, bickering egotism, no desire to parade his masculinity. He was as clean as a pine on the mountain top, and as sound and as strong. The love of such a man was worth any effort, any sacrifice.

In time they would come to an intimate understanding, with none of the commonalities and jealousies that marked the average love. They would go through life. . . .

Here she paused in her dreaming and laughed at herself. Surely she was taking a great deal for granted. She was building a beautiful air-castle that might fall with a crash and bury her heart and its hopes.

A lean prospector overtook her, but did not attempt that bland smirking the average male imagines paves the way to woman's favor. He recognized her as the woman for whom King Norn had shot the Apache Kid. Thus, to him, Norn's protection walked before her, a deadly menacing shadow that warned:

"For this woman I killed the killer of twenty. Pause at your peril."

The prospector did not pause. He circled around her, eyes to the front, and passed on, omitting even the conventional "Howdy ma'am."

The girl marveled a little at the man's actions. Heretofore, every man she had met on her rides had volunteered much information concerning the weather and the country, and had favored her with wide, bland smiles.

Presently she discerned a man approaching. He was belaboring a couple of burros. Then, as he saw her, he turned the burro from the road, and pretended to be occupied with straightening the packs. She recognized him as the shaggy raconteur who had once sought to entertain her on the hotel porch. He did not look up as she passed. The other prospector had given him a hurried account of the passing of the Apache Kid. The shaggy one heaved a sigh of relief as she passed. Not for a panful of nuggets would he have accosted her. However harmless his greeting, it might be misconstrued, and he proposed not to toy with chance.

She met the westbound stage whose driver and passengers had been fully posted by the lean prospector. The driver touched his hat, but the passengers of the coach sat tight, and refrained from the usual road pleasantries.

Dora was familiar with the main road, but had never ventured to explore the branch that led to Norn's ranch. But she anticipated no difficulty; there was Rain-maker, and the ranch lay in the lap of the mountain.

She turned into the ranch road, confident and happy. Dreamily she watched the lizards speed through the sandy aisles between the greasewood and squat burro weed. She smiled at an inquisitive jackrabbit that raised up and stared at her with round, foolish eyes, the sunlight redly illuminating his thin ears.

The sweep and majesty of the mountain-guarded desert intensified the naive simplicity of thought that now seemed so delightful to her. All that cultivated reserve, that chill, aloof attitude of the spectator, those experiences with strutting masculine egoes had faded into remoteness. She felt the kinship of nature, and her childhood called to her with a sweet, insistent voice. She noted some stones set in orderly fashion, by the roadside, and recalled the play-houses built of sticks and stones in the long ago. She was tempted to dismount, and again build a play-house of sticks and stones. Love demands naturalness and will have none of the artificial, none of the cold wisdom of experience. Therefore, children attract love with little or no effort, and when grown-ups come under its spell they, too, see through the eyes of children.

The girl recalled slipping her hand into Norn's with no regret for her vanished pride. It had been a perfectly natural move; she would do it again, she shamelessly admitted, if he gave her an opportunity.

Presently she came to a fork of the ranch road that momentarily puzzled her. She decided to take the road most plainly marked with evidences of recent travel. A freight outfit, bound for the mines beyond the desert hills, had left broad wagon tracks and the thick imprint of many hoofs. She rode on, following the broad track of the freight wagons. She noted that the road veered slightly from the mountain, but was confident that it would soon turn toward Rain-maker.

Desert atmosphere and distances are deceiving. It now seemed to the girl that she was approaching the mountain; in reality she was headed for a pass in the desert hills between Norn's ranch and Tunnel Cañon. She had not the faintest conception of the vast proportions of the mountain. There it was, apparently directly in front of her. She crossed Big Wash and rode on steadily toward the pass.

When a short distance from the mouth of Tunnel Cañon, she glanced to the left and glimpsed the buildings and the trees of the Norn ranch. She was about to turn from the road when she discerned a number of riders approaching from the direction of the great wash she had crossed. They were not riding in a compact group, but were spread out in a long line whose left flank intervened between her and the ranch. Some intuitive sense of danger prompted her to turn toward the mouth of Tunnel Cañon.

Immediately, the riders changed their course, proving to her that she was the quarry they were seeking. The panic of the hunted overwhelmed her, and she galloped recklessly to the foot of the ridge whose eroded and crumbling side formed the far wall of the cañon. A fearful backward glance convinced her that they were closing in on her. Frantically she urged her horse up the slope of the ridge. Then, as she again glanced back, she glimpsed a spotted horse. She pulled in abruptly and laughed weakly. How foolish she had been to give way to such an unreasonable panic. Norn always rode a spotted horse, and here he was with his cowboys, trying to overtake her and give her safe conduct to his ranch.

But was it Norn? Something unfamiliar in the riding of the man on the pinto checked the natural impulse to ride down the slope to meet them. The rider on the spotted horse lacked Norn's easy grace and daring. She saw him ride around boulders over which the other riders leaped their horses.

Suddenly two riders broke from the advancing line and raced into the mouth of the cañon. The other riders swung to the right to intercept her, should she attempt to dash into the adjoining cañon. These were plainly hostile tactics. Surely Norn would not order his men to surround her, simply to guide her to the ranch.

She looked about her desperately, and then sent her horse into a plunging gallop up the ridge. The crack of a rifle slapped the silence of the cañon, and the whine of a warning bullet made her gasp and abruptly halt. She could hear the shouts and curses of her pursuers as they struck the foot of the ridge. She was trapped.

CHAPTER XII

AS THE pinto carried him into the desert, the gambler groped through a mental fog for some plan that, if properly set in action, would remove King Norn from the world, and leave Chance Hardy free to follow his desires. But, invariably, every thought-trail led back to the one impregnable fact, the killing of the Apache Kid and the method thereof. Norn's use of Sunshine as a diversion from the main attack proved him a thinker; and the gambler, primitive, led by emotions, dealing only with ignorant men, inwardly cringed at the thought of meeting a gunmaster who possessed not only a superior body, but a mind to plan, to peer into the future, to make deductions. And that meeting, if he remained in the Hemper territory, was inevitable.

For hours, he bitterly recalled, he had watched the Kid, hungering for the gunfighter's life. Many times, with comparative safety, he might have emptied the shotgun into the killer's body, but had been held back by a nameless dread. Enter then King Norn, the thinker, to destroy the Kid with a little plan. At that inevitable meeting might not the thinker once more put forth a little plan of which the kernel thereof was death for Chance Hardy?

And back of it all was the woman. What a thick-headed fool he had been not to see that King Norn had been his principal rival from the day of the girl's arrival in Hemper. Inwardly he writhed as he realized how Norn had permitted him to clear away the human trash around the woman. Norn had watched him intimidate the little preacher, the doctor, the men who shrank back from danger, the weaklings, and the riff-raff of the town.

Men like Bundy and Brown, requiring special treatment, had been honored with Norn's personal attention. The man dealt not only in little plans, but in great plans made up of many little plans. Even the killing of Billy Snake was a plan that warned all men that those who rested in the shadow of King Norn's friendship held the right to call on his heart's blood for their protection.

And back of it all was the woman. The gambler possessed the imagination that is rooted in emotion and desire, and he visioned her warm, glowing beauty. But before her rose an ominous figure, alert, terrible, and with an eye reflecting lightning thought.

"Norn," he muttered, bending low over the saddle horn. "Norn."

The woman seats herself in a luxurious chair and looks out on the world of men. In her face is a maddening, unfathomable mystery. An indifferent smile plays about her scarlet lips, and in her eyes dwells a lure that draws eager fools to their doom.

Bundy, with his drunken leer, swaggers up, and the ominous, terrible figure transforms him into a battered, bloody, cowering wretch. Brown, the soft and fat, mouthing large words, approaches with airy gallantry only to be transformed into a sodden thing bawling for water. Other men fall back into the shadow. Then the Apache Kid, the killer of twenty, presses forward, and, in a flash, becomes an inert piece of clay. And then many men fall back into the shadow. Now another presses forward—Chance Hardy.

The ominous, terrible figure seems to project from his eyes two fine wires that converge in the heart of Chance Hardy. The guns flash, and two bullets follow the fine wires into the heart. It is finished. The ominous, terrible figure turns and extends a hand to the girl. She rises and gives him a smile of sweet surrender, and slowly they fade, fade, fade.

The gambler cursed and jerked himself back into reality. He now plainly saw that there was only one course left for him to follow, and that led to Pete and his men, under whose protection a campaign against the rancher might be safely planned. Norn's actions indicated that he had either foiled an attempt to capture the boy, or knew that the gang now held the lad.

Norn, doubtless, was trailing him now, for the rancher was conceded to be a wizard in the desert. Hardy hauled the heavy rifle from its scabbard, pulled in the pinto, and listened. Suddenly he noted an ominous glare in the sky over Hemper. Fire. The town was burning. His saloon would be destroyed. The old safe would probably be looted as soon as it cooled.

The glare increased in intensity and mounted higher. The gambler groaned. The town was doomed.

Then he realized that he was wasting time. Norn would not let the burning of Hemper swerve him from his course. The rancher knew the desert intimately, every trail, every cut-off, every water-hole. No, he must not think of returning to town; Norn would surely ambush him.

Though the gambler was a town man, he was familiar with the camps of the gang. He knew that Twenty-eight Palms was closer to the Norn ranch than the Witch-talk camp, and that the gang would, in all probability, choose the former camp for their headquarters while lurking about the Norn ranch.

He followed the ranch road until the loom of Rain-maker warned him that he was nearing the north side of the basin. Turning from the road, he cut across country. Progress now was slow. His had been a soft life, and he found it difficult to hold his courage in that gray waste. He entered Big Wash, and was forced to ride far to the south before he could find an exit from the great, sunken way. The sun was above the horizon before he glimpsed Twenty-eight Palms.

Pete snatched up a pair of battered field-glasses.

"Holy smoke," he ejaculated, "it's Hardy ridin' Norn's painted hawse!"

Hardy, as he approached the camp, decided to withhold nothing from the gang. He was riding Norn's horse and they would demand an explanation. He would put them on the defensive, convince them their safety lay in unity.

As he dismounted beneath the palms the rovers gathered about him.

"You didn't get the boy, I see," observed the gambler, with a dark glance at Pete.

"Not yet," that worthy returned optimistically, "but we'll pick him up in a day or two. But what you doin' with Norn's hawse?"

"Norn killed the Apache Kid in my place last night. The Kid took a ring from Miss Wayne, and Norn come in and put up a play against Sunshine, and then beefed the Kid. Then he throws his guns on me, and cleans me, and then takes me over to the hotel. There I broke away, jumped his pinto, and here I be. You bungled the deal somewhere, Pete. Norn must know we're after the boy."

But Pete and his men were not impressed by the accusation with which Hardy finished his account. They considered only the red fact of Norn having killed the Apache Kid. Hardy's importance, his power, his ability to reward shrank to proportions pitifully small and insignificant.

Pete, the far-sighted, voiced the general sentiment when he grumbled:

"You sure have fixed your own funeral. Paws off for me, if Norn's on your trail." Then with a calculating look. "Bring any money with you?"

"Why, no," faltered Hardy. "How could I?"

"That's right," mused Pete dryly. "You couldn't gather it on the run."

THE gambler flushed darkly at the insult, and forced a smile that failed to deceive even the dullest of the rovers.

Pete hooked his thumbs in his belt and insolently looked the gambler up and down.

"Now that we've bungled the game, as you say, what's your next move? If Norn knows we're after the boy, he hain't likely to leave him hangin' on a tree for us. The chances are he took him to town with him, and got him hid away safe. And by this time he's in the desert with a bunch of men."

"No, I don't think that," Hardy soothed. "I looked back and the sky was all lit up. Looked like the town was burnin'. If it was, Norn couldn't get men to leave——"

"Well, then," Pete cut in quickly, "that means your place is gone. You won't be in shape to deliver the money."

"Oh, yes, I will," the gambler hastily assured him. "I've got it in a Los Angeles bank."

"That's what you say," muttered Pete; and drew back to confer with his men.

The gambler shivered inwardly as he noted that he was debarred from the council. They were treating him as they would an outsider.

Presently Pete returned.

"The boys don't jes' like this deal as it stands now," he said slowly. "At the start they was willin' to take your word, but now they want to see the color of your money before they go ahead. They're thinkin' of old man Norn and the old bunch he wiped out. They was willin' enough to pick up the boy and hold him for you, but they don't want open war with King Norn. If you want any kind of action now, you'd better slip into town and drag back some dinero. The sight of real money might stir the boys up a little."

In Pete's attitude was a thinly-veiled insolence. Hardy, to the raw-boned desert rover, was now "a has-been" who had taken cover like a coyote. Pete knew that money alone could not hold a man erect in the desert country; to survive, he must have the power to chill the hearts of men with fear. Removed from his saloon, with its glittering display of bottles, its roulette-wheel and faro lay-out, the gambler seemed an insignificant man. Certainly, with his white hands and soft body, he was unfit to cope with the bronzed, lean desert rovers. He had ruled them, Pete now saw, through their desires, and not through any natural strength of character. Whisky and gambling had been the sources of his power. He had done nothing, suffered no hardships, yet he had used them to gather money for him. They had been the peons and he the lordly Don.

The dominant qualities that Pete, through policy, had held under cover now sprang up, virile, hard, and not to be denied. Contemptuously he regarded the man who had once ruled him, sneering a little at the fine boots, the white vest, and the dazzling watch-chain. A few days in the desert, and the fine boots would be in tatters, the white vest soiled and greasy, and the smooth hands blistered and sore.

Lower and yet lower sank the gambler in Pete's estimation. By long rides, by sweat and toil, he, and his sort, had kept Hardy's hands white, and had made it possible for him to wear fine clothes and sport dazzling watch-chains.

Even now Hardy was attempting to use him to secure a woman. Why serve him further? Since Norn had stripped the mask from his face, the card-sharp was not to be feared.

Hardy, in a desperate effort to regain his prestige, sought to address the gang, but Pete viciously checked him.

"Don't start no talk with the bunch," warned the lean leader, the muscles around his eyes twitching. "If you got anything to say, say it to me."

Curbing his rage as best he could, the gambler forced himself to speak in regretful tones.

"Pete, I've been on the square. I've told you all. I might have come out here and kept a lot of stuff under cover, but I laid every card on the table. Do you think that is the way to treat a man who plays a square game with you? You agreed to get the boy, take so much money and ask no questions. I didn't think, and I don't think now, that you or any of the boys would kick out on the given word."

The little earnest speech impressed the gang. Even Pete was moved by it.

"I could have said," Hardy went on, "that Norn loaned me his pinto, but I didn't; I told you the facts. He got the drop on me, but that don't mean he is goin' to run me out of this country."

Suddenly he turned to the gang.

"Is there a man among you that ever come to me for a dollar or any kind of help and didn't get it?"

The answer was a chorus of negative grunts.

Then to Pete:

"Let's get the boy now. He's the high card. When you hold him, Norn can't do a thing."

"Why can't he?" Pete sharply questioned. "What's to hinder him?"

"He wouldn't want the kid hurt," the gambler said smoothly.

"Maybe so," Pete grumbled doubtfully; and squinted up at the sun.

"We'd better be movin'," Hardy meekly suggested. "It's toward noon now."

But Pete took his own time in getting the gang on the trail. There were the horses to bring in and water, and Pete found that he had to mend his saddle before he could proceed.

Hardy inwardly fretted and fumed, but made no effort to hurry the men. His position was too precarious for any display of dictatorialness.

It was an hour past noon before they mounted and rode slowly toward the Norn ranch.

"We'll go over and have a look around," Pete hedged. "Maybe Pedro will have something to tell us. I sent him into Norn's cañon."

"Where's Bundy?" Hardy suddenly queried.

"Watchin' Big Wash near the camp," Pete replied indifferently. "That gives him somethin' to do, and he's not in the way."

The gambler made no comment, though a vague suspicion regarding Bundy's motive in consenting to remain near the Witch-talk camp flitted through his mind.

NORN, in the meantime, had joined his men at the foot of Witch-talk, and had struck Dickie's trail leading from the camp.

The tracks of the shod pony were not difficult to follow and they soon came to the cañon into which Bundy had led the boy.

Norn discovered the dead rattler in the little camp at the head of the cañon, and carefully inspected the body of the snake and the tracks around it.

"Looks like it had been shot and then trampled," he muttered. "A man doesn't trample a big snake unless it has bitten him."

Closely he exmained the boy's tracks and the impression of the lad's body in the sand. At no time had the snake been within striking distance of the boy.

"I think the man was bitten," the rancher concluded, as he straightened up. "If he's carrying venom, his trail will be short."

Norn led the way out of the cañon and up the slope of the main ridge of the desert range. There, just before they struck hard and rocky ground, they discovered that the man had dismounted and leaned against his horse.

"This surely indicates that something is wrong," Norn reasoned, as he traced out the tracks with his forefinger. "The tracks are far apart and he evidently threw his whole weight on his heels. He's either sick or carrying snake venom."

They rode up to the crest of the ridge, but the ground, hard as flint, gave up no trail-signs.

Norn decided to send his men south to the nearest water-hole.

"If you strike his trail at the water-hole, stick to it," he ordered. "But in case you don't, drift back to the ranch by circling to the north. I'll cover the country back to Rain-maker."

The rancher rode slowly north, dismounting at times to closely scrutinize the ground. In a few hours his patience was rewarded. He discovered the faint impression of a horseshoe. He walked in ever-widening circles until he struck the trail leading down from the ridge into a tributary of Tunnel Cañon.

The trail now was as plain as a wagon road. The little sandy places between the boulders were as wax to hold the imprints of hoof and foot.

When he came into the main cañon, he found a group of tracks indicating a halt. Apparently the boy, now in the lead, had dismounted and returned to the man. The man was surely sick or hurt, for the tracks of the boy indicated that he had attempted to move the man. They were evidently headed for the ranch. With the horse following him like a dog, the rancher stole down the cañon, alert, watchful, rifle at the ready.

* * *

PETE was the first to sight the woman. Hardy noticed his excitement, and then a man back of them called out—

"That looks like a woman ridin' a light hawse."

"Where's your field-glasses?" the gambler yelled at Pete, forgetful of Norn, the boy and lost prestige.

Pete signaled "halt" to the men, and, with a curious side-glance at Hardy, produced the field-glasses. Hardy frantically grabbed for the glasses, but Pete swung them out of his reach.

"Don't be in such a rush," he coldly advised; and gave the gambler such a malevolent glance that the latter recoiled as from a sudden lick of flame.

What Pete saw through the glasses transformed the habitual hard, set expression of his face into one of bland and eager interest. He even smiled reminiscently.

"It's her," he said softly, as he lowered the glasses. "Uncle Charlie's niece."

As he gave the glasses to Hardy, and noted the gambler's eagerness, Pete's face resumed its old set expression, though a slight twitching of the corners of his hard mouth betrayed some violent inner agitation.

The magic glasses brought the girl full into the gambler's vision. Long he gazed, while the horses moved restlessly, and the men muttered vague comments and glanced at one another furtively.

"Yes; it's her," Hardy exulted, reluctantly returning the glasses to Pete.

Pete slowly replaced the glasses in the worn case.

"I don't reckon—" he raised the flap of the saddle-bag and dropped the glasses into the leather pocket—"we need bother—" his fingers fumbled the buckle— "about the boy now."

Irritated at Pete's slothfulness and apparent waning interest in the whole affair, the gambler burst out impatiently.

"Sure, the boy don't count now. Come on, you'll get your money just the same."

He started to urge the pinto forward, but Pete raised a detaining hand.

"Hold on; don't be in such a rush. Let's talk business."

"But she's gettin' away from us," expostulated Hardy. "We're losin' time. What do you mean by 'business'?"

Pete glanced back at the gang and smiled grimly. Then he made a suggestive movement with his thumb and forefinger, the money sign.

"What do you want?" snapped the gambler.

"You keep your money in a Los Angeles bank," Pete quietly replied. "I want your check for twenty thousand dollars. I'll make the divvy among the boys. Got a pencil?"

For a moment Hardy considered the new proposition. Twenty thousand dollars was a lot of money, but small change compared to the wealth of Dora Wayne. And there was the irresistible magnet of her beauty. Also, in the event that Pete attempted any crookedness, he could stop payment on the check.

Hastily he filled in the check, and passed the slip of paper to Pete who immediately passed it back to the gang for inspection and approval.

"Tain't like real money," complained the hook-nosed man, as he returned the check to Pete, "but, if you say it's O. K., that's good enough for me. You'll get the coin and divvy, will you?"

"That's the idee exactly," Pete assured him. "We get the coin and Chance gets the girl. Come on."

They spurred their horses into a gallop and plunged down the bank of Big Wash, some of them tobogganing their horses down the steep declivity. On the hard floor of the wash they raced northward like jockeys leaving the post.

Pete contemplated no involved plot to secure the girl for himself. He would pick a quarrel with Hardy, after the girl was captured, kill him, and thus prove to the gang that his will was not to be disputed. There were various channels through which the check might be cashed, and Hardy would not be alive to stop payment. To bind the rovers closer to him, he would divide his share of the money among them.

Hardy's only thought now was to secure the girl. Norn was a vague memory. The beauty of the woman called to him with insistent sweetness. This was the hour for which he had yearned, for which he had plotted through gray days and black nights. She would soon be his to have and to hold.

As they dashed from the cover of the wash, Hardy shouted with an odd wild anxiety.

"I don't want her hurt, Pete. Understand? She mustn't be hurt. Handle her easy."

The gambler saw Pete's lips move, but caught only a faint mumble above the thump of hoofs and the crackle of brush.

Pete's reply, had the gambler heard it, might have aroused his suspicions by its cryptic accentuations.

"Don't you worry. She won't be hurt."

THEY saw the girl urge her horse up the ridge, and at this point Pete detached the two riders who raced forward into the cañon to halt the fleeing woman with warning shots. Then they obliqued and swept up to the foot of the ridge.

At the first warning shot they pulled in.

"Come on," yelled Hardy. "She's stopped. Come on. Don't you see they've stopped her?"

Two more shots in quick succession made Pete frown puzzledly, and Hardy curse wildly.

Then the gang roared its surprise as the girl whirled her horse and plunged down the slide of gravel and boulders that formed the wall of the cañon. As she disappeared, Pete turned his horse and galloped toward the mouth of the cañon. Hardy and the gang straggled after him.

Pete pulled his horse back on its haunches as one of the detached riders broke from the mouth of the cañon. The man was swaying drunkenly and would have fallen from the saddle but for Pete's steadying hand.

"Somebody—one man—got poor Abe," coughed the rider, "and took the girl in the tunnel. Got me through the lungs."

His breath came in short whistles and blood welled from his mouth.

The gang came up and two men eased the wounded man to the ground.

"Somebody got Abe and done up Bill there," Pete snarled, to rouse the blood lust of the gang. "Whoever he is, he's in the tunnel with the girl. Shall we throw down our hands now and let him have her?"

"No," came the roaring chorus, "get him—get him!"

"Everybody take cover," ordered Pete, dismounting and jerking his saddle-gun from the scabbard. "We'll creep up and have a look at the hole of that lone wolf."

A man placed a canteen of water within reach of the wounded Bill. They crept forward, from boulder to boulder, from bush to bush, until they came to a smooth barren stretch of sand on which lay the crumpled body of the luckless Abe. Beyond the dead man stood his horse facing two horses not far from the black slot they knew to be the tunnel's mouth.

Cautiously Pete raised up, his sharp eyes searching for some coign of vantage from which lead could be sent straight into the tunnel. But the outlook for a long-distance attack was most discouraging.

Facing the tunnel was a long smooth barren slope offering no shelter. At the first visible bend in the cañon rose a jagged mass of quartz. This offered shelter, but the lead would thud harmlessly against the wall of the tunnel which had been driven into another upheaval of a mighty ledge that diagonaled across the cañon beneath the sandy floor.

"There's no use to figger on settin' back and smokin' 'em out," Hardy remonstrated feverishly. "Somebody might come along and carry word to Hemper, and Norn might come in on us from the south. Daylight's goin', too. I tell you, we got to rush 'em and wind it up quick."

"If you're in such a hurry, be you ready to take the lead?"

Pete's sneering query held a cold challenge.

Hardy was silent. The lean desert rover gave him a contemptuous glance, and clicked——

"All right; we'll rush 'em."

Pete drew his men back and proceeded to give them the plan of attack.

"First, we'll Injun file until we come to the wall of rock. Then we'll bunch up and rush the mouth of the tunnel. The girl will be in the cross-cut and the man will prob'ly be flat again the near wall. We must try and not get in each other's way. I thought of callin' to him to give up, but don't think that would be much use. He got poor Abe and old Bill is about done for, and he prob'ly reckons on stayin' to the finish."

"Why not divide and rush both sides," Hardy suggested.

"That would mean too much of a mix-up at the mouth o' the tunnel," Pete objected. "No; we'll rush 'em from this side."

"I don't like the looks o' this," whined the hook-nosed man. "That feller in the tunnel is a bad hombre. He got two of us; he may get some more."

Pete's lip curled back over his teeth, and he forced himself into an awe-inspiring rage.

Upon the hook-nosed man he heaped every vile epithet known to the border.

"You limber-jawed, rotten-hearted coyote, you lousy son of a squaw," were the mildest of his smoking denunciations. "Are you afraid of one man and a bawlin' woman," he spat forth, as though the words burned his lips, "you leavin's of the scum o' hell?"

The hook-nosed one seemed to shrink, to grow smaller, to wither under the blast of sizzling words. He made a vague gesture of submission to fate, and Pete suddenly turned to the gang, and swept them with his verbal fire.

"If any of you are scared to foller a man, go back to your hawses and I'll take that holed-up wolf alone. Who's the first quitter?"

A savage roar answered him, and, lest they lose courage and fail him at the last moment, he bawled, "Come on, boys," and ran toward the slope down which Dora's horse had plunged.

For a moment they hesitated and then charged after him, growling and cursing, working themselves into a blind rage. Hardy was the last man to follow, and, as Pete reached the wall of rock, he flung a baleful glance at the man who took the minimum risk.

They hugged the wall of rock until within a few paces of the mouth of the tunnel. At a signal from Pete, the file of men coalesced into a frenzied, struggling mass that surged to and fro for a breath, and then rolled into the black mouth of the tunnel.

CHAPTER XIII

NORN'S ACTIONS, as he turned the bend in the cañon and recognized Dora, were swift and sure. As the leading rider fired the warning shot, Norn caught him fairly in the notch of the sight and pulled the trigger. A fleeting glimpse of a frantic horse kicking free of a dead man, and then the second rider in the notch of the sight. A quick pressure of the trigger, and the second rider clawed at his saddle horn, lost control of his horse, recovered, and finally turned and galloped in an erratic course from the cañon.

Norn ran down the cañon, shouting the girl's name, and halted a few yards beyond the tunnel.

"It's Norn," he called; and beckoned imperatively.

She hesitated to dare the steep slope, and then, with a quick intake of breath, whirled her horse and urged him down the declivity. The animal slid down, almost on his haunches, but lost his footing as he struck the floor of the cañon. Dora sprang free of the floundering horse and into the circle of Norn's free arm.

He half-carried her into the tunnel. Scuffing tentatively for rattlesnakes, he guided her to the end wall of the left branch of the crosscut, and took up a position back of the opposite angle.

"You're safe in here," he answered her, peering around the angle at the mouth of the tunnel. "Whatever comes, do not move."

"I was so worried about Dickie," cried the girl, forgetful of the danger that threatened her. "A Mexican came in and told the doctor that some one at your ranch had been bitten by a rattlesnake. I kept thinking that it might be Dickie——"

"No harm has come to Dickie," Norn happily interrupted, piecing together the evidence he had gathered on the trail.

The rancher knew that Desert Jack would not release the Mexican unless Dickie had returned to the ranch. The man who had taken Dickie into the desert hills was playing a lone hand. Bitten by the rattler, he had been forced to seek the ranch. The boy was safe and unhurt. He heaved a sigh of relief. The gang had failed to capture the boy. It was now a matter of straight fighting.

Counting Hardy, the gang could not muster more than ten men, and he had accounted for two. Then there was the Mexican and the man with Dickie. Six men to face, and his father had, with the support of two cowboys, wiped out a baker's dozen of the old gang. If they attacked the tunnel before dark, he was confident he could give them each such a hot reception that the survivors would give up the fight.

If they attempted a night attack, he would have much in his favor. Coming in from the gray gloom into the pitch-dark tunnel, they would, for several vital seconds, be at a disadvantage. He could probably empty the magazine of his repeater before it became necessary to leave the shelter of the angle, and, for the girl's sake, carry the fight to them.

If they merely besieged the tunnel, he would creep out before daylight, and gain the shelter of the rocky crest above the tunnel. From that point, with the coming of daylight, he would make the stakes of death so high that his enemies would be glad to get out of the game.

Again he thought of Hardy, and abruptly queried—

"Did you see a man on a spotted horse?"

"Yes," she answered, and the rancher smiled approval of her calm even tones. "I thought at first it was you and was about to turn back." Then, with intense eagerness: "Can't I do something in case they attack us? I can use a revolver."

Her gameness forged another link in the chain of love. She was no sniveling, whining, helpless creature; she was all that his heart desired, and somehow, some way he would survive and shield her from all harm.

"You can help me more by keeping out of harm's way," he said gently. "If they come, keep close to the wall and do not move. It will soon——"

Norn never finished that sentence. With appalling suddenness the mouth of the tunnel darkened with struggling men, the taller ones bumping their heads against the roof.

The blast from Norn's rifle in that hole in a rock was like the long roar of a titan through a great megaphone. The heart-shaking bang of six shooters, the ***zunk*** of lead against the wall, and the rifle's blast reduced the curses, grunts, and groans to a hideous monotone.

Norn's first shot ripped open the jugular vein of a wild rover, and plowed a red furrow across the brows of a man back of him. Down went he of the torn jugular, spouting blood under the heedless heels of the gang. The man with the red furrow across his brows, whirled and stumbled blindly from the tunnel, bawling for help. He finally found his horse and fled.

Norn was now only a few feet from them; they had only to rush forward and seize him. But the unending blast of his rifle was as a fiery wall of death between them and their mad desires.

The leg of the hook-nosed man was shattered and he fell as though he had inadvertently stepped into a hole. Yet he was of a tough breed, and, sprawling, he managed to raise his six-shooter. Him Norn killed; then sent two bullets into Pete, and slightly wounded the man next to him.

The rancher dropped his rifle, drew his six-shooter, and leaped into the tunnel. The slightly wounded man put a bullet in his shoulder, paralyzing the arm. Pete, dying on his feet, sent three bullets into Norn's body, breaking a rib, inflicting a severe flesh wound in the thigh, and ripping a long diagonal slash across the chest. Norn shot the slightly wounded man in the mouth, and that left, alive, Pete and Hardy, the latter unscathed.

The gambler had hugged the side of the tunnel close to the mouth, striving to get in action the heavy rifle he had found on Norn's saddle. Now the gambler pulled the trigger and the bullet grazed the side of the rancher's head. Norn pitched against the wall of the tunnel and sank to his knees.

Pete, his vitals torn with lead, turned as Hardy fired. Life was now swiftly becoming a vague, receding thing to Pete. His dimming faculties groped for the cause of that rifle blast to his ear. Norn—yes, it was Norn—was dying. Only Hardy was left, and Hardy blocked some insistent desire—some all-important attainment. A picture of a dark-haired, violet-eyed woman flashed before the inner eyes of the rover. The ancient primitive desire blazed up—she was within his grasp—one more heart-wrenching effort and he would be alone—with her. Swaying and grinning the death-grin, he fired from the hip at the gambler. For a breath Hardy stared at him blankly, and then suddenly slumped.

"All down—all down," mumbled Pete, his legs spraddling uncouthly.

Slowly he turned to look down at Norn.

THE rancher, clawing, falling, struggling on the slippery slope of agony, fought his way back to consciousness. He saw two spraddling legs, slanted his six-shooter upward and fired.

Pete received the shot in the abdomen. He turned casually enough, and with little, slow steps walked from the tunnel. Drawing on some desert-fed source of vitality, he strolled to the center of the cañon, and paused as if to meditate on the mysteries of nature. Then suddenly he collapsed and pitched forward on his face.

Norn was now crawling from the mouth

of the tunnel. His arm gave way under him and he moaned faintly—

"Dora, Dora."

His thought was for her safety, not for the aid she might give him.

For ages, it seemed to him, he fought against shadowy fiends intent on pulling him down into oblivion. Inch by inch he raised himself to his knees, and, swaying, turned slowly toward the tunnel. For a moment he stared at the litter of dead men, and then toppled forward.

Silence. An inquisitive lizard appeared on a rock near the mouth of the tunnel and cocked his head and blinked at the still forms.

The girl, numb with dread, removed her hands from her ears. In the silence, Hope cowered in the dust.

Prayer had been her only resource in those terrible crashing moments, and now she sought its sustaining strength. But the silence mocked her, flouted her prayers, and sneered at her fainting soul—

"He is dead, and all your prayers can not bring him back from the land of shadow."

In sudden, wild desperation she crept to the angle of the crosscut and peered down the tunnel. The rays from the setting sun slanted into the tunnel, bringing out the dead faces with photographic clearness. Those once virile creatures, throbbing with life, were now as fallen trees in the wake of a cyclone—still forms, deathly silence. And Norn, the restless, the daring, the resourceful, had fallen. Only she remained. That she might mount her horse and ride quietly home, the man had died. Freely he had offered up his body to ghastly wounds that no desecrating hand might touch her.

A faint moan quickened hope to panting life. Perhaps—perhaps he had survived. She ventured past the angle, but, when she came to the dead men, her soul sickened at the sordidness of death, its flat and flaccid sameness.

When she reached Norn's side, he had fought his way back to full consciousness. Immediately his mind began grappling with the situation. The nerves telegraphed his brain that he was badly hurt, and he began to individualize his wounds. With her assistance, he raised himself to a sitting posture, and attempted to take stock of his injuries.

"I'm all right," he murmured; and then a billow of darkness overwhelmed him.

She eased him back and looked about her frantically. What could she do? Blood from his wounded head was trickling into his ear, blood was welling from his shoulder and chest, and from his side and from his thigh.

"What shall I do—what shall I do!" she wailed.

Norn's lips were moving. She bent down to catch the whispered words.

"Get water—canteen—go ranch—quick —wagon—Jack."

"But you'll die while I'm gone," she sobbed. "I can not leave you."

She saw his face set, saw him summon his reserve of strength, saw his lips form the words—

"I will live."

She glanced up at his horse standing near the bend in the cañon and ran to secure the canteen hanging from the saddle horn.

The water revived Norn wonderfully. He managed to murmur something concerning bandages. She drew off her underskirt, tore it into strips, and, working frantically, managed to bind up his wounds. Her surgical knowledge was limited, and the bandages were very crude and clumsy, but helped to stanch the flow of blood. When the last knot was tied, she paused for a breath, and then bent down and kissed him. He felt the pressure of her lips and his soul set itself for the grim, unending struggle. He must not give up—he must fight, fight, fight.

Her horse, not being gun-shy, was cropping bunch grass not far away. She mounted and rode at top speed toward the ranch, heedless of bush and boulder.

Her whole mind was now concentrated on speed, and the deep-lunged desert-bred horse responded nobly. He carried her across the open desert, dodging the cholla and barrel cactus, and finally struck Big Wash just below the stream-fed willows. Up the far bank he plunged, slipped, struggled, somehow gained the top, and sped up the long slope to the ranch-house.

Desert Jack appeared in the bunk-house door and she called to him wildly. Dickie came running from the house squealing his delight. But the boy was of secondary importance now.

"Norn is badly wounded," she gasped to

the foreman. "I left him near an old tunnel. He was unable to move."

Desert Jack whirled and returned to the bunk-house at top speed.

"Get your stuff," he bawled at the doctor who was bending over the mumbling Bundy. "Norn's badly shot up at the old tunnel."

The foreman lumbered toward the stables in an awkward gallop to develop a magical speed in harness-handling. He did not forget to snatch a lantern from a peg on the stable wall, for he knew that it would be dark before they could reach the tunnel. Nor did he overlook his big, canvas-covered canteen.

Dr. Cunningham was not a time-waster, and threw his satchel and his instrument case into the spring wagon just as Jack hooked the last tug.

"I'm going with you," Dora called.

"Tell her to stay with the boy, Doc," grumbled Jack. "A woman's no use nohow."

"Stay here!" yelled the doctor, as Jack sprang into the wagon and the team leaped forward.

"They don't want you," said Dickie, with a little touch of masculine swagger. "Jack says a girl can't do much anyhow."

"He is probably right," she sighed wearily, recalling her clumsy efforts to bind up Norn's wounds.

Bitter against the restrictions and the limitations of her sex, she slowly sought the porch to watch and to wait.

The ride to the tunnel was one the doctor never forgot. Desert Jack stood up the greater part of the way. When the wagon struck a boulder, the foreman would rise in the air, apparently float for a moment, and then return with a leg-numbing clump to the wagon. They rode on three wheels, on two, on one.

Desert Jack drew heavily on his vast stock of profanity and weird objurgations.

"Limpin', weepin,' bald-headed Moses. Move, you mud-footed, hay-burnin' hammer-heads, hot ham you, move, I say. By the bleedin' feet of the twelve a-postles, so help me Judas H. Priest, did you ever see such zim-zam sons of so-forth in all your zink-zank zip-zapped days!"

And at last they clattered into the cañon. The doctor leaped from the wagon, lantern in hand, and ran to Norn's side.

The dry, little surgeon's specialty was gunshot wounds. With deft sure movements, and the eager but clumsy assistance of Desert Jack, he scissored away the blood-soaked clothing and Dora's crude bandages.

NORN was vaguely conscious that some one was working over him, that deft hands were applying soothing bandages and compresses to his wounds. Ages ago soft lips had pressed his, heartening his soul to rise dominant and supreme above the cringing flesh. Gripping the slippery edge of the-will-to-live, as a man suspended over a chasm grips a rocky shelf, he drew strength from the memory of that kiss, and, inch by inch, worked back to full consciousness. His superb vitality, conserved by a life as clean as that of some creature of the wild, responded quickly to the doctor's ministrations.

"Couldn't kill you with a club," he heard the surgeon say.

Then, above the pulling, drawing pain of his wounds, he felt the sharp stab of the hypodermic.

Again the doctor's voice as from a great distance.

"Miss Dora got us here in jig time. You're all hunkydory now. We'll have you home in short order."

Norn wanted to speak—to tell them to care for any surviving members of the gang, but the words would not come. The pain became blurred, shadows of drowsiness encompassed him. Nothing mattered now.

"We'll load him into the wagon," the doctor planned briskly, "and then have a look at the others. I gave him a shot of morphia that would put a horse to sleep."

When they had placed Norn in the wagon, Desert Jack led the way to the tunnel, and swung the lantern over the dead as the doctor expertly examined the bodies.

"Guess this bunch don't need no nursin'," was Desert Jack's grim conclusion. Pensively he added, as though ruminating over some pleasant memory: "I was with Dad Norn when he cleaned up the old gang. This reminds me of it. Things ought to be quiet from now on."

As they left the tunnel, the callous Jack, viewing death as a mere incident, called back:

"Good-by, boys. I'll see you later."

The bodies of Pete and the first rider to enter the cañon caught Jack's eye.

"There's a couple more," he told the doctor. "Pete and 'Yuma' Abe."

The doctor made a swift examination of the two bodies and shook his head.

"Come on," growled Jack. "We've wasted too much time on these critters already."

"There might be some more, Jack," the doctor gently reproved. "We wouldn't want to leave a wounded man to suffer."

"All right," grunted the foreman. "I s'pose you're right. You drive and I'll go ahead with the lantern, and see if the boy collected any more scalps."

Jack, holding the lantern above his head, zig-zagged to and fro in front of the team as they emerged from the mouth of the cañon.

"Here's another one," he called to the doctor who was carefully guiding the team around the boulders and the clumps of greasewood. "It's Bill Sycom."

The doctor leaped from the wagon and proceeded to snatch Bill back from the shadow of death. The rover had pleaded in vain for help from the man with the bullet-creased brows. That worthy, intent only on saving his own hide, had left his comrade to die. Later, that incident reminded Bill that there was no honor among thieves and drove him into the peaceful trail of honest citizenship.

In time the rover, his agony eased by the hypodermic, was stretched out by Norn's side.

"No more stops now," Jack savagely proclaimed. "I promised that boy's daddy to always look after him, and, by the livin'-lights o' my mother's eyes, I'll do it. Come on, now! No more monkeydoodle business!"

The little doctor made no reply to the grizzled foreman's outburst, but seized the reins and clucked to the horses.

With Desert Jack walking ahead, swinging the lantern and marking a clear trail, their progress was necessarily slow, but they finally reached the ranch without mishap.

Dora and Dickie were waiting on the ranch-house porch, the girl shivering with dread, the boy awed into silence by his sister's despair.

"He's alive," shouted the doctor, as he pulled in the team near the porch, "and he'll live till he's a hundred. Get those Chinese busy with a couple of beds, Miss Dora."

"Dickie, you hold the lantern," bruskly ordered Desert Jack, "and make yourself useful."

DORA, choking with joy, ran to do the doctor's bidding. She drove the Chinese servants to distraction with wild orders, and was finally forced to prepare the beds herself. They brought Norn in first. Dora flew to his side, but the doctor's frown of disapproval made her draw back, abashed, fearful that she had unwittingly broken some all-important medical law.

"Better leave him be," snapped Desert Jack, with brutal frankness. "You can't do him no good."

Norn, groping back to reality through the opiate fog, saw the girl's face as though it were floating on air.

"Take her to town," he moaned faintly.

Firmly Desert Jack took the girl's arm and led her from the room. She was too disconcerted to resist.

"You'll find plenty of beds in the house," he said gruffly. "Get some sleep."

The old foreman was unreasonable in his love for King Norn. He considered the girl and her brother responsible for it all.

"If it hadn't been fer that kid the gal would have stayed where she belonged," he muttered. "And, if it hadn't been fer her, they'd a-never cornered King. Dawg-gone a hoodoo woman anyhow!"

When Bill had been placed on the bed in the room adjoining Norn's, and Dickie had been sent to his sister, the doctor turned to Jack.

"You'll have to go to town tonight for help," he said, removing his coat and vest, and rolling up his shirt sleeves. "I need a lot of stuff, too. We'll give them another going-over before you leave. I'll give you a list of what I need. I didn't anticipate three men to look after."

"Wonder if I hadn't better take the gal and the kid to town with me," Jack debated.

"Certainly," snapped the doctor. "We've enough to look after without bothering with them."

Jack stepped into the hall and called to the girl, bidding her prepare for a night trip to town. Faintly came her assentive answer, and he returned to the bedroom to reassume his rôle of assistant surgeon.

When the last fresh bandage was in place, the doctor straightened up and rested his hands on his aching back. But he permitted himself little relaxation.

Rapidly he scrawled a list of his medical needs and gave it to Jack.

"We'll have to bring Bundy in the house," he told the foreman. "Then I'll have the three of them under my eye, and can manage till you return. Bring the Beckner boys back with you. They're friendly to Norn and are good reliable fellows. Now for Bundy."

They found Bundy sprawled out on the bunk, inert and stupid, and carried him into the house.

Then Desert Jack hitched a fresh team to the spring wagon, and called to the girl. She came out, with Dickie clinging to her arm, and, silent and forlorn, obeyed Jack's gruff suggestion—

"You'd better get in the back seat."

These men, she thought, seemed leagued against her. Even Norn, the moment danger ceased to threaten her, put her from him. She had thought to make some attempt to repay him for what he had done for her by tender nursing, by reading to him, by many little soothing attentions, but, it seemed, she was not wanted. Doubtless the gruff and grizzled being, guiding the horses through the gray gloom, was right—there was nothing that she could do. She was only a responsibility, a burden. And she had been wickedly selfish. To rid herself of worry, she had foolishily ridden into the desert, against the repeated warnings of her uncle. To Norn she had brought nothing but agony. Little wonder they desired to be rid of her.

When they were on the main road, and within a few miles of town, Desert Jack squirmed a little as he recalled his gruff treatment of the girl.

"You see, miss," he half-apologized over his shoulder, "a woman that hain't used to shootin' can't do much. I don't say it's her fault, but she's better off all snug and quiet in town. Not that we don't want you and the boy around, but because it's better fer you to be where folks—er—r—r—don't have to worry about you. Understand?"

"Yes; I understand," she replied sorrowfully.

Desert Jack, noting her sorrowful tone, mentally concluded that explanations or near-apologies were wasted on a woman. He wagged his head hopelessly, and whipped up the team, holding them to a rattling pace.

Through the cottonwoods they saw the lighted windows of the hotel office, and then the white-shirted figure of Uncle Charlie.

The old man emitted a joyous bellow of welcome and waddled down and swept Dora and Dickie to his breast. Desert Jack, taking advantage of the excitement, drove on to rout out the druggist.

CHAPTER XIV

ALMOST imperceptibly the mild desert Winter faded into the ineffable but ephemeral beauty of the desert Spring. The snow, which had given to the crests of Rain-maker and Witch-talk the semblance of shattered marble, disappeared with magical suddenness, and the mountains became murmurous with many waters. Through the soft mists that wreathed the peaks rainbow after rainbow smiled back at the paternal sun.

But to the lonely girl, brooding on the hotel porch, the smiling rainbow signaled no message of hope. Desert Jack, a bi-weekly town visitor, had kept Uncle Charlie informed as to the various stages of Norn's convalescence, but had offered none of the intimate details for which Dora's heart craved. She could not then bring herself to question the grim, forbidding old foreman who, while friendly enough with her uncle, seemed intent on avoiding all contact with her.

Even Uncle Charlie offered little or no comfort. Following his bellow of joy at her escape, he had at every opportunity, plied her with questions concerning the fight and its aftermath, until in desperation she had begged him to permit her to forget the horror of that struggle. Thereafter, the old man had refrained from any reference to the battle, contenting himself with giving her brief excerpts from Jack's reports concerning Norn's condition.

The girl, sad and introspective, took to watching the desert road. Some day, perhaps, he would appear, vital, graceful and debonair as of yore.

"But," whispered Despair, "what of it? He does not love you. No word of love had he ever said to you. You slipped your hand into his and he made no response; you kissed him and he was heedless."

Common Sense struggled for a hearing,

crying faintly: "He knew you were greatly excited when you slipped your hand into his; and, when you kissed him, he did not respond because he was fighting his way up from the valley of the shadow of death. Be calm, be practical——"

Pride, cold and insolent, pushed Common Sense aside, and pointed toward the East, saying:

"Return to your own land and forget this place of sun and sand, this place where men die with curses on their lips, where hard-bitten souls press on to some nameless goal. Why should you, at whose feet many men have groveled, pine and fret because one man does not send you a message? What is he to you? Return to your security, seeking the safety of your old aloofness. Become the amused woman again, the spectator, the watcher. Have done with this foolish yearning, this agonizing. You need no man's love."

Then the voice of Pride faltered before the golden tones of Love.

"Pride is an empty-headed braggart," quoth Love calmly. "Listen, and I will give you the wisdom of ages. My favor is cheap at any cost. How can the man help loving you, since you love him? Go to him, speak your innermost thoughts, be unafraid. Cast aside encumbering conventionalities, for I smile on those who dare. Has not the man offered up his body to wounds for your sake? What more could you ask? Why require silly little words? Why cling to the customs of weak, faltering fools who always lose in the game of life and of love?"

Well, she would write him a letter. She locked herself in her room and began a struggle with the greeting.

"Dear Mr. Norn" seemed too formal for the eye of a man who had dared death for her sake. She tore the paper into bits. "My dear King Norn" impressed her as being labored and it went the way of the first. At last she decided to give a little touch of bravado to the greeting, and accordingly she wrote:

> DEAR SIR KNIGHT:
>
> Your major-domo, the redoubtable Jack, has for some strange reason, refrained from giving us the details of your recovery. The days and weeks have passed and we have heard no word from you beyond the bare fact of your convalescence. We——

The "us's" and the "we's" annoyed her. Why was she so chary of that brave little pronoun "I"?

She tore the page into very small bits, deciding to write what was in her heart, just to see how it looked on paper. Of course she would not mail the letter. She started bravely enough, but the effort was no prize-winning composition.

> My darling:
> I love you——

Humor came to her rescue and she laughed at the school-girlish lines. What would Norn, the virile, the reader of good books, the worldly-wise, the far-seeing—what would he say if his eyes fell on those mawkish lines? Where was her mental poise, her calm serene outlook? Couldn't she think of anything beyond, "My darling—I love you"? Apparently she could not, for she tore the paper into infinitesimal bits, and sighed like any love-lorn maid.

NORN, his wounds healed, reposed in an easy chair on the sunny porch of the ranch-house, and hearkened to the pleas of one Rat Bundy, and a certain humble and chastened Bill. It seemed the twain were very grateful for certain favors they had received at the hands of Norn, and entertained fond hopes of having the slate wiped clean. They were not, as yet, able to work, but would be in time—barring the anniversary of the snake-bite which, according to the doctor, would bring a mild recurrence of the symptoms—yes, in time they would be fully competent as cow-hands, post-hole diggers—in fact they would welcome any sort of labor that would give them an opportunity to prove that their hearts were rightly placed.

"Very well," Norn agreed. "Go to work when you're able."

The rancher, like all fighting men, cherished no hatred. Senseless hatred, spouting black abuse, and petty revenge seem to be peculiar to the softlings who, when the guns begin the death-talk, hurry home and crawl under a table.

Bundy and Bill returned to the bunk-house, counting themselves Norn men. Thereafter they would serve him faithfully and loyally—and they did.

Norn looked out over his pleasant domain, but his thoughts were not for the green alfalfa fields or the fat cattle. He was debating a question of far greater importance than his possessions. Could he now, with safety, tell her that he loved her?

He had been convinced from the first that the man who threw himself at her feet could not hope to meet with favor, much less love. To prize love, she must be made to seek it, to suffer in the quest. He had suffered—the puckered scars on his body attested that—and she, too, must learn that love, despite the poets, treads no primrose path.

Of course she admired him, and was doubtless grateful, but he did not want admiration or gratitude, nor caresses born of excitement. What he desired was love, unprompted by anything save his natural ability to attract and to hold it. The smitten yokel might pursue the maid of his choice, but he, King Norn, would trust to attraction. If attraction failed, he would not murmur.

Still, Love required certain little amenities. Perhaps a letter—a cheerful humorous letter—to her would bring a welcome reply. And he might have Desert Jack take her some roses. Surely such a gift would not place him in the category of the frantic egotists she had so calmly rebuffed. Unaware of Desert Jack's brusk treatment of the girl, he presumed she understood that, in sending her back to town, his only thought had been for her comfort and safety. He did not know that the old foreman had, largely by avoiding the girl, sought to convince her that Norn was glad to sever an acquaintance that had brought nothing but danger and suffering.

Desert Jack came up to the porch, and, rather shamefacedly, gave Norn a huge bouquet of wild asters he had gathered on his return from town.

Norn's eyes brightened at the old fellow's thoughtfulness.

"Thought you might like 'em," Jack said, somewhat sheepishly.

"You old scamp," Norn exclaimed affectionately; and laughed.

Jack dodged playfully and seated himself at the young man's feet. He lighted his pipe and puffed for a time.

"Yeh huh," he recalled softly, "your ma always liked flowers. Recollect when you was a little feller, me and you would get her the first flowers. Huh, one thing brings another. Jes' such a Spring day as this you was born, King. I brung your ma some flowers like these, and she jes' insisted that I hold you. Your pa was there so tickled he was cryin'.. I give you back to your ma, and your pa follered me out and give me a handful of gold. Says he, 'Jack, I ain't a drinkin' man and on you depends the honor o' celebratin' the arrival of the new owner of this ranch. Go to town and turn it up on its left ear.' Maybe you think I didn't foller directions. Ask any o' the old-timers and they'll tell you that folks marked time by that celebration."

A long pause and then casually:

"Talked with Uncle Charlie jes' 'fore I started home. He said his niece was figgerin' on startin' back East fer keeps next week——"

Norn straightened up, and winced as though against a stab of pain.

"What's up, King?" Jack exclaimed, with quick solicitude. "That side bother you?"

"Nothing—just a twinge. Go on. You said—she had decided to leave—next week."

"Uh huh," Jack went on in gossipy fashion. "Boy's well and strong now, and Uncle Charlie says she's sick of this country. I told him that wimmin, as a gen'ral rule, were more respons'bility than they're worth. She was in the office and heard me. She come out and says she, 'Mr. Jack, I'm sorry if I've been a burden to any one. You can convey my regrets to Mr. Norn, and bid him farewell for me.' Them's her very words, and, I'm bound to admit, the way she said 'em made me duck and dodge. Uncle Charlie seemed all rattled and shuck up. He tells me, on the side, every time he opens his mouth he puts his foot in it. Guess I got the same habit. Well, anyway she's goin', and I reckon the country will take a rest——"

"Jack!" Sharply imperative.

The old man dodged. Norn gave him a long somber look. Then the rancher, rising abruptly, dropped the flowers in his chair, and paced the length of the porch and back.

"How's my gait?"

"Steady enough," admitted the puzzled foreman.

"How do I look?"

"Not so bad. Little pale around the gills, though. Sunburn's off you, and I'd say you're short fifteen pounds."

"Think I'd stand a ride to town—and look like anything when I got there?"

"Why, yes," Jack debated. "If you take it easy and don't over-do."

"Then get Spot and my best saddle." This with suppressed excitement that added to the foreman's puzzlement. "And, Jack—" over his shoulder as he hurried into the house—"don't talk so much."

Jack gaped weakly and wagged his head. Sharp words from a youngster he had raised. Remotely his mind, dulled with long years of labor, connected the girl with Norn's unusual outburst.

"Dawg-gone a hoodoo woman," he grumbled on his way to the stable. "Can't she see he wants to get shut of her."

Carefully he curried and saddled the spotted horse. The animal had had a long rest, and, as Jack led him up to the porch, he gave vent to his spirits by little prancings and playful nips at the foreman's arm. To Norn he nickered a soft welcome.

"Ho-ho, old boy," laughed the rancher, "I'm glad to see you."

He pressed his cheek against the velvety muzzle. He mounted and settled himself in the saddle. What a joy it was to feel a horse between his knees again, to look up at the sky instead of a ceiling, to recover health and strength. Wonderful world.

The sunshine of gladness flooded his soul. He leaned from the saddle and gripped the old man's shoulder.

"I told John to put the flowers you brought in water. And, Jack, forget what I said—about you talking too much. Good-by."

Desert Jack looked after the man who held all the affection of his cynical old heart.

"Same as he was when a boy," he softly soliloquized. "Sorry the moment he hurt your feelin's—ready to say he was wrong."

Norn cantered down the Hemper road conscious that all his line of calm reasoning had crumpled before the sweeping assault of one fact—she was going away. There was now no time for further experiments. Love, he now humbly admitted, could not be reduced to a scientific basis. Nothing possessed sufficient strength to either coax or coerce love. Even the circle of danger with which he had surrounded her was a web of gauze to stay the coming or the going of love.

What man, worthy of love, would pause at any circle of danger though it were woven of the fires of hell? Bah, he had done too much thinking. Love was heedless of thoughts or words, or even deeds, delighting in upsetting all the calculations of man, in nullifying his most carefully-planned actions, in snapping rosy fingers under the nose of the philosopher, in refuting all that has ever been said or written since man rose from the primeval slime.

Despite his claims of dominance, his perfervid announcements of superiority, his eager acceptance of the empty title of pursuer, man, when it came to love, was, compared to woman, a conceited numbskull, a passer of bouquets to self, a half-wit fumbling with the dynamite of destiny. Woman, love's trusted agent, enjoyed plenipotentiary powers rightly denied blundering man. She was versed in love's secret diplomacy, and she knew, long, long before the self-imagined dominant one awoke from his trance of egotism, the winning moves in the ancient game.

About all a man could do was to tell her that he loved her—a fact, no doubt, of which she was well aware from the moment of their first meeting. He, King Norn, ranked not one notch above one of his cowboys riding to learn his fate from the lips of some giggling girl.

To plan, to think, to do anything save to tell her that he loved her was futile. If she smiled, heaven would be his; if she was unresponsive, he could only return to the old desert and suffer—and somehow survive.

Suddenly weariness overwhelmed him and he felt sick and faint. He was not as strong as he had supposed. She must not see him worn and faint. He longed to see her, but pride insisted on an appearance of strength. He would rest a little, and then, as of yore, dash into town. Dismounting, he noted that the movement jarred him. As he stretched out by the roadside, he drew a deep breath of the perfumed air, and then relaxed. Nature, working unceasingly to restore energy, whispered to him—

"Sleep, sleep, sleep."

Just a few moments of blessed repose and he would press on to learn his fate. But the kindly mothering desert had a different plan. Soothed by the murmurous voices of Spring, warmed by the friendly sun, he fell asleep.

DORA, after her epistolary failures, had brooded for a few days, and then had resolved to make what she considered a final desperate move. She would, at the first opportunity, get word to Norn that she had decided to return to her Eastern home. If the man cared, he would bestir himself; if he was indifferent, she could find some surcease from pain in the thronging city.

Calmly she informed Uncle Charlie of her decision. He plumped down in his chair, nearly wrecking it.

"My Gawd, Dora, you don't mean it," he wheezed. "What'll I do? I'll be so lonesome, I'll want to die."

A grampus sigh, and then meekly:

"Well, I s'pose this town holds nothin' for you. I had hoped, though, that you'd——"

"Oh, I'm not leaving today," she interrupted, with a little, teasing laugh. "Sometime next week—maybe."

"Maybe?" echoed Uncle Charlie, clutching at straws.

She nodded brightly, and left him to his thoughts.

The next day fortune favored her plan, and Desert Jack, as related, became an unwitting Cupid. She watched the foreman drive down the desert road. Norn, now, doubtless, able to ride, would have time after Desert Jack arrived at the ranch to ride to town before dark. Surely—if he cared—he would come. It was just a chance; and she shivered with nervous dread.

Reading was a bore, there was no solace in music, even Dickie oppressed her. If Norn started Hemperward—and the thought made her heart leap—she might ride out and meet him—accidently.

Danger? She snapped her fingers and tossed her head proudly. She had met Danger face to face, and had not whimpered. Then, though she did not name it, she now knew that Norn's spirit walked before her as a lictor walks before royalty. No more, she had not failed to note, was she greeted with bland, insinuating smiles. The men of the desert now ventured naught but brief, respectful salutations, seemingly intent on passing her as quickly as possible.

Hurriedly she donned her riding-habit, and was soon galloping down the desert road. When she came to the ranch road, she halted to debate what seemed to her a most momentous question. Should she ride on boldly and meet him, or should she turn about and permit him to overtake her? Deliberately she refused to contemplate the probability of disappointment.

She became conscious of faint, plaintive cries drifting down from the void above her. She looked up and smiled at a long V of wild geese moving steadily northward. No human bickering for them, no false pride, no evasiveness. Their sure, swift flight was their answer to the ancient call. They swerved slightly, and she lost them in the glow of the sinking sun.

Suddenly she was thrilled with wild rebellion against everything that kept her from the man she loved. What folly it was to quibble with Fate, to exact conditions, to listen to the solemn pratings of pride. She would go to him—now. Even to the ranch.

She turned her horse into the ranch road, laughing excitedly.

When she saw the spotted horse, and the prostrate figure in the sand, her heart almost stopped beating. She could not imagine Norn inactive, or resting. He was hurt.

But he had seen her coming. After all—and he smiled faintly—his theory of attraction held real values. He blessed the weakness that had prompted the siesta in the sun, and pretended to be asleep.

She fell on her knees at his side, sobbing—

"You're hurt, oh, I know you must be hurt!"

There was no mistaking the poignant love-note—the wicked dissembler—he rose as though greatly startled. Then he laughed softly.

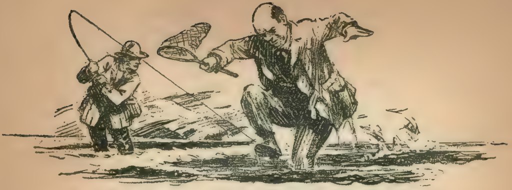
Despite her protest against his over-exertion, he assisted her to rise; and then, scarcely knowing how it happened, she was in his arms and they were murmuring the age-old nonsense of lovers.

Came the purple evening, with a sickle moon, attended by a single star, hanging low over Witch-talk's crest.

"The desert is a paradise now," sighed the girl.

His reply was all that she could desire—

"With you—yes."



A FISH STORY ABOUT LOVE

by Harold Titus

Author of "Appreciating Peter," "Strength of the Gentle," etc.

GIDEON LIMES was dictating. The sunlight of early April, wholly Springlike for the first time, streamed through the window of his office, spattered on the nude dome of his egg-shaped head and set its accentuating rays full on the framed photograph which overhung his dingy desk, a photograph of himself, in waders, fishing-jacket and khaki sun-hat, hip-deep in scooting waters, a fly rod balanced in his fat hand and a sharp consciousness of the camera's purpose on his heavy, usually inexpressive features.

The warmth annoyed Gideon and he stirred, looking absently at the great knot of hair at the nape of Miss Vera Somers' delicate neck as she sat beside him, pencil ready above her pad, waiting for him to resume his stumbling way. Her hair was like the sunshine, that brilliant.

"Begin again," he said, hitching and scowling into the gloomiest corner of his desk and toying clumsily with a paper-knife.

"Messrs. Hoyt & Hoyt, Youngstown, Ohio. Dear sirs."

His voice filled the room. In other days before the plate-glass partition had been erected and his office was a railed corner of the factory itself, he had competed for hearing with the whirr of belts and clatter of machinery. The clash of industry no longer disturbed him, but habit was strong, and he still shouted his dictation.

"Dear sirs," he repeated, passing a hand over his head, "yours of the twenty-third instant received, contents noted. In reply would state sample shipment Phenix Brand galvanized iron were—was—In reply would state sample shipment Phenix Brand galvanized iron was not up to our required standard. Recommend——"

He swung in his chair, searching for the proper phrase. That brought him to face the sun and he blinked in annoyance. He swung back.

"Recommend that your representative call at earliest convenience. Would be willing to give your product thorough trial—thorough trial——"

The slight expression of annoyance departed as his vagrant eyes fell again on the photograph. "Thorough trial—but prefer one five-pound German Brown trout——"

He broke short.

Three happenings coincided with the interruption: Gideon Limes flung the paper-knife impatiently away. A freckle-faced youth at a desk behind him choked. The superbly rounded head of Miss Vera Somers quivered ever so slightly.

Limes turned to look at the source of the choking sound. He saw bony, boyish shoulders bowed low over an absorbing litter. He stared hard at Miss Somers and saw the ear nearest him redden. He looked up at the photograph.

"—— the blessed sunshine!" he said with a ponderous sigh.

The girl laughed, riotously; not, it seemed, so much at what he said, but rather as though the exclamation offered excuse to liberate laughter which threatened her self-control. And the youth behind, freckles swamped in a fiery flush, looked at her with his blue eyes dancing.

"Finish that for yourself," said Gideon. "Now; take this:

"James C. Pulver"—voice mounting—"Pulver Rivet Company, Cleveland. Dear Jim. Yours under date of February twenty-seven received and filed. Note what you say regarding trip. In reply, state have delayed answer until own plans arranged, as per my first letter on subject.

"Now plan to leave for North June fourteen. Will take usual month's fishing. In view your health, would urge you do same. You could go earlier or stay longer. The shack is comfortable, four rooms, tight screens. Can sleep ten. At no time will there be more than six. Four of us own it. Always careful not to fill up with cook-stove fishermen. Would state this does not apply to your case. You will get interested in trout fishing, I know.

"The Boardman one best streams ever ran down hill. Plenty fish, few neighbors. You might even catch the Lunker. He is trout I have fished for years. Must net over five pounds. German Brown. Broke my rod in second joint last year. Carries away several items tackle each year. I will get him yet, so don't think you could, after all. Better be on deck though, to watch. Will be great sight.

"Conclusion, would state you are foolish go through life thinking only of rivets. I have time for two things, fishing and business. Better worker for being fisherman. Every business man should fish for trout at least eight per cent. of his time. Reduces cost upkeep. Besides, you might see me catch Lunker. Hoping to receive prompt affirmative reply, I'am, yours truly."

Miss Somers waited. Gideon was slumped in his chair, the bare suggestion of a smile on his face. He sat so a moment, hands loosely clasped across his rotund stomach; his lips moved in soundless syllables. He rose languidly.

"That'll do for now," he said, as if he thought of other things.

He gazed into the street below. He jingled his keys. He turned and looked at the picture again. Hulbert, the foreman, came in, letting the din of machinery through the door. Limes sighed impatiently and walked heavily toward him.

And Washington C. Kirk, who should have had his mind on the work before him, followed the corpulent walk until his employer had passed down between the rows of bumping presses. His blue eyes shifted, then, to the small, competent head of Vera Somers and rested there for so tenacious an interval that the young lady looked up from her note-book, left off pattering the keys of her typewriter, and, with her smiling brown ones, met them. She flushed, her eyes flamed, her trim shoulders trembled and she turned back to her work, leaving toward him one smooth, pink cheek, tempting to a degree.

Just that, but when Kirk forced his gaze back at the task before him he found that it was a trifle giddy, that the symbols on bills and invoices were less prosaic and, could he have known, the look that hinted at loneliness which had been in them for four long months had almost disappeared.

For those four long months young Kirk had functioned as stock and shipping clerk in the Detroit factory of the G. Limes Can-Screw Works and during that span, though he rubbed elbows with those about him, he had lived in complete isolation.

Limes, the stodgy bachelor, could scarcely be expected to grow companionable with the lowliest of his office staff. "Puny" Boggs, who kept the books, was not the type to grow chummy with a youth. Hulbert's digestive disorders made it difficult for him to handle the factory force, let alone make friends. And Miss Somers, the efficient, the intent, had so impressed him with the impersonal quality of her manner that from the first he had told himself that hope of familiar contact there was impossible.

But now, when their smiling glances met and struck response, he knew that he had been mistaken, knew that behind the girl's office demeanor lurked characteristics that were far from repelling, and the realization warmed him—even more than did the shaft of sunlight, now streaming full across his desk.

His attention, like his eyes, persisted in straying across the litter before him, across the floor to Vera Somers' desk, where they lingered, speculating.

WHEN the noon gong sounded Kirk whisked through the office door and trotted the four blocks to the one dingy restaurant the vicinity afforded; then back again, after gastronomic accomplishments of rather amazing rapidity. He knew that the girl brought her lunch with her.

When he reentered the office, that lunch scarcely tasted yet, was arrayed on a napkin spread over Vera's desk. She looked up at the unusual intrusion, a sandwich half-way to her mouth—a mouth as red as the glass of jelly staining the linen. She smiled and tossed her head, a gesture which was not at all like an intent executive, so girlish, so gay.

He approached slowly, not just certain of himself, and stood before her stiffly.

"The sunshine," he began, "sort of fogged up our esteemed employer's mind."

She laughed and bent forward quickly.

"Poor old fellow!" she cried, and Wash Kirk thrilled at the lilt in her unbusinesslike voice. "He gets that way every Spring when the first warm days come and he commences to dream of fishing."

"Can't blame him," said the boy still, uneasy, not knowing just what to say to this girl. "The Boardman's a great stream, especially for Browns."

"Oh! Are you a fisherman, too?"

She looked up, quite amazed. Wash Kirk flushed. Her quick interest was as pleasing as it was evident.

"Not his kind. My home's in the trout country and fishing is just like sleeping well or eating with a good appetite. Matter of course. We expect it."

"You came from the country!" she breathed, incredulously. "Isn't that fine!"

Her brown eyes were wide and, realizing, Kirk felt his assurance mounting.

"Which: *coming* from the country or coming *from* the country?"

"Oh, just knowing it, being a part of it. My, how we city folks envy you!"

His blue eyes searched her face at that, prying to find insincerity. She sat relaxed in her chair, mouth drooping a trifle as though she were tired. She seemed a little girl there, wholly unlike the self-reliant person who had awed him.

"I guess you mean it," he said, delighted, leaning a hip against her desk. "I've heard people say it who didn't mean it."

"Of course I mean it," she replied, seriously. "I've never seen the country except at a resort at too many dollars a week. I've never known country people or anything but city ways until I came here.

"Poor Mr. Limes! He isn't very graphic and he never talks to me except on business, but sometimes I think I get more out of the letters he dictates to his fishing pals than I do out of anything else—about the country. He's awfully prosy, but I know how deeply he feels about rivers and woods and sometimes when he's been sending off letters about them, or his vacation plans, or the fish he has caught, I can't get down to work for hours."

Wash Kirk's manner changed. The restraint left him. He moved around the desk, seated himself on its edge, heedless of the way his coat threatened disaster to the unconsumed meal and said:

"That's funny! Here I've been on the job four months, with never a soul to talk to about the open, believing that you all, that you especially, didn't have time to think of anything but the city.

"I've lost weight for loneliness. You see, it's horribly necessary that I stay here a while, a long while, and I was just about getting down to the ragged edge, what with being lonesome and not knowing anybody who'd agree with me about a city and not being able to take my job or any of your jobs as seriously as you people seem to take them—I—gee whiz! Miss Somers, why didn't you say something?"

"Say something! How was I to know that anybody in this rackety place knew about the things I've longed for?"

And so they went on, each revealing to the other; the one the eagerness to learn, the other the longing to re-live by telling, eyes warming intimately, Kirk hitching along the desk closer to her as each freshly discovered common interest delighted him.

"You said," she ventured in a pause, "that it was necessary—horribly necessary—for you to stay here."

"Yes? Well, it is," shaking his head slowly. "You see, my dad's a queer old bird. He's the Gaylord Potato-Planter Company, which you've never heard of. If I stay here long enough, it'll be me.

"My governor started that factory when I was so big. Now it's going to be pretty much mine—maybe. Last year dad got the idea that we had no efficiency, no modern methods, all that sort of thing. So he sends Washington G. out into the world to learn the manufacturing game.

"'Go out,' says he, 'stay a year, come back with a letter of recommendation that you've won by hard work and enterprise, and the management's yours.'

"Fine, understand. But my dad! He's rock-ribbed. If I should fall down——"

He whistled two little descending notes of apprehension.

"I'd have to take my chance in some place like the Limes Can-Screw Works for good—and then where'd I be?

"I don't amount to much," he went on after the silent interval which followed his shoulder-shrug. "If I did I'd take this year's stunt seriously. I've learned a lot, but somehow I like our little factory better. Only ten men, understand. We call 'em all by their first names and they do us. My mother is neighborly with their wives. When one of 'em wants a day's fishing, he takes it, and if we're behind we all work evenings. We haven't had a man leave since I can remember.

"It's the usual thing for country boys to come to the city. I've never wanted to. Since I've been here I've wanted to get back home—awfully! Why, the folks here 're all pitiable to me. Poor old Limes, with his eight per cent. of the year fishing! And Boggs! Think of a man spending his life taking ledgers so seriously. I'm not under-estimating his importance, but he'd be a lot better bookkeeper even if he took Limes' advice and played a little.

"Hulbert—I'll bet he hasn't laughed since he saw his first automobile. He thinks the sun rises and sets among those machines. He doesn't even know parks, let alone that rivers run and winds blow!

"And I've got to try to be like those men for a year—gee whiz!"

He told her of his home, of the great cut-over lands, the plains of northern Michigan, of fish he had caught, grouse he had killed, the furs he had trapped for his mother; he etched cedar swamps under Winter moons and duck-shooting on Houghton Lake. He told of running white water in a canoe, of hiking through Autumn woods. He talked of wild flowers and birds.

He enthused over his dogs, the setter, the hounds; over skating and skiing, described his runs on snow-shoes. He discussed the fine craft of camping and went into ecstasies over sunsets and storms. She listened eagerly to his stories of the lumber camps, of weather indications, and without consciousness whatever, she leaned toward him, pointed chin in her hand, eyes reflecting her hunger for more.

"But," she argued finally, "all you have to do is make good on this job and you can go back to it. Think of us who've never had a chance to know what you know, who dislike this racket and rush just as much as you do."

"Yes, make good on this job," he interrupted, scowling absently. "I haven't a chance of going back unless I make good; my governor's that sort. So I will—I've *got* to, now!" Then, focusing his eyes on her face—"I think you're going to like it very much up there."

"Oh!" she said with a catch of her breath and started back.

Nor did she allow him to kiss her—not for three full weeks.

AFTER they had made their pact they decided, quite originally, they foolishly thought, to keep it wholly to themselves for an indefinite time.

"Having it a secret will make it all the better, won't it?" he asked, as several million lovers annually ask.

Walks in the parks followed, and long, rainy evenings together, reading aloud from books and from one another's faces. And no one else knew—not a soul!

One May morning after he called Vera for the first dictations Gideon Limes unwrapped a bundle from the printers. It contained big white boards with black characters on them—

SMOKING POSITIVELY PROHIBITED.

And while he sat there he wielded a heavy-leaded pencil on one of the placards. Then, quite deliberately, seriousness reflected in his little gray eyes, he held it up.

"Oh, Kirk," said he, "tack this up where it'll do the most good."

In a flaming flush the boy read—

LOVE AFFAIRS POSITIVELY PROHIBITED.

Limes tossed it rather indifferently to Kirk's desk and began the day's work.

At noon the lad said to his sweetheart:

"The old chump! How'd he find out? I suppose it's his idea of a joke."

Vera eyed him a long moment.

"I wish I could think that, dear. You see, I know him so well, and I'm sure he didn't do it to be funny. He meant it. The fact is, he's come to depend on me for so many things that he doesn't like to bother with, that he'd have to do if I didn't.

"There's no sentiment in his life. He's never been in love. The only thing he considers now is that he's in danger of losing me. He'd be awfully mad if he thought you intended taking me away from here.

"If it weren't for circumstances we wouldn't care a rap, but you know, dear, that if we fail to get our letter of recommendation out of this office it means six months lost—and six months is a terribly long time!"

Kirk nodded grave assent.

A week passed, the two particularly careful to display no indications of affection and Limes, looking over his fat shoulder, grunted a summons for Wash.

"Ever fish much, Kirk?" he asked, and before an answer could be given—as if the reply were of no consequence whatever—went on. "It's my religion—fishing. My picture, there," nodding. "Spend a month near Traverse City every Summer.

"Most time to go, now. Every time I get ready to go, I think about something that happened a few years back.

"Had a rod. Wonderful rod. Moller Dry-Fly Special. Built for me; four ounce, eight feet, balanced like a watch. Great for night fishing when you can't see your fly. Could always tell by the feel just what I was doing.

"Got so I depended on that rod. It did my fishing for me. Didn't realize for a long time what its value was.

"Fella come up to our camp who didn't know the game. We fishermen don't take to greenhorns much, but he was a nice fella and wanted to learn. I lent him my rod.

"He got a rise. Whipped back like a greenhorn will, crazy to get his fly on the water in a rush again. Hooked the brush behind him, didn't think, slashed down like he was splittin' wood. Put a set in that rod of mine—strained it, understand."

He looked at the photograph and blinked. Then picked up a sheaf of papers.

"Ruined, you know," wriggling forward in his chair. "Ruined—ab-so-lutely!

"That's all, Kirk."

Wash moved toward his desk, puzzled.

"Oh, Kirk!" He faced about. "Since then I've never let my likin' for a fella interfere with my own interests. Keep my tackle to myself. Now, if a fella come along and insisted on using anything I depended on—I'd run him out of camp!"

With a pencil he commenced checking footings on the papers he held.

As they walked that night in Palmer Park Wash Kirk related the incident and after a silent, hand-gripping moment Vera sighed:

"It'll go hard with us, I'm afraid. No use shutting our eyes to it. He's so set in his ways that nothing can change him. He can't make himself think of giving up an idea. Why, the way he quarrels with his best friends in letters is frightful!

"If they catch more or bigger fish than he does, he raves. If they disagree with him about tackle he never forgets. He hasn't any use for anybody's opinions or wants—except the men who win big-fish prizes in the magazines he reads. He almost worships them, but other folks—he's sure to have his way at any price.

"You see, he's bound I'm not going to leave him. He thinks you're to blame—and he'll—he'll——"

"There, don't fret!" he said, scowling up into the trees. "If he fires me I can start again. It'll only be six months lost!"

"But I'm jealous of those six months! I want you all, and I know you can't love me your fullest until you take me away!"

So day by day they strove to be oblivious of one another and not heed the cloud that impended—a bald-headed, gray-eyed cloud which rumbled enigmatic thunder threats—and the time grew shorter before their month's reprieve, when Limes would be away.

"If we can tide things over until then," Wash said, frowning at the water from their deck seats on a Belle Isle ferryboat. "We have more of a chance. He's getting restless. The other day I saw him looking into a fly-book on the sly and yesterday he was discussing reels over the telephone. He'll be shy on patience and the least little thing's likely to spill our beans!"

"And if he does come back rested and happy he may overlook what we fail to cover up." Vera said slowly, with the procrastinating optimism of youth.

June's first fortnight dragged along, dragged for the boy and girl because dread was on them, with all their happiness, and dragged for Gideon because the call of the stream had fevered his veins. The last days were a furious harvest of detail and never before had

Wash Kirk realized how fully Limes depended on Vera.

She was his memory, his sense of caution, continually beside him, alert, anticipating wants, unobtrusively advising him, taking the initiative at other times. The two worked evenings and for a week the lovers had little privacy. That told on the girl even more than the long hours and Kirk saw, with great pride, that she missed him frightfully.

"No wonder he's sore at me," the boy thought.

The last, mad day! Suit case, waders, rods, hip boots, tackle boxes, creel, landing net piled about him like offerings to some fat god, Gideon Limes sat in his shirtsleeves, glaring at the final barriers which kept him from freedom. Vera vibrated between him and her desk, rattling off letters with amazing speed, eyes bright, color high, nerves strained. But now and then she looked at Wash Kirk and the light in her eyes softened, her mouth lost its tensity and she smiled, most adorably.

Noon—two o'clock—an hour until train time. Pen in hand, Gideon Limes hurriedly read the final letters. One by one, he scrawled his signature and put them aside. He gathered the last, reading, as was his habit, with moving lips:

Acme Brass Foundry
Toledo, Ohio
Washington, Dearest!

He put down his pen. He turned ponderously to look at Vera. He kept on moving until his gaze rested on Washington G. Kirk. He eyed the youth a moment, then gave that summoning grunt.

When the apprehensive youth approached, Limes, buttoning his collar, said:

"Of course, we're sorry you have to leave us, young man. I hope you can see your way clear to staying on the customary two weeks?"

Kirk's mouth opened and closed twice before words came.

"But I don't want to quit, Mr. Limes! I want to stay—I—why, I've been trying my best; there hasn't been a word said to me. I——"

"Remember my spoiled rod? The fella who used it did the best he could, too.

"Oh, Boggs!" lifting his voice and turning away as, with fat chin lifted and fat fingers fumbling, he contrived a knot in his black tie.

When he had gone, Boggs teetering after for a last word, Vera gave way and, looking into the sweltering street, cried openly.

"Never mind, sweetheart," Kirk whispered, putting his arms about her shoulders. "I'll hook on somewhere else."

"If he were only like other men," the girl sobbed, "we might appeal to some other side of him. But he knows only th-this and fish-fishing. There's no way to approach-ch him. H-he——"

She looked up suddenly, tear-filled eyes peculiarly alert.

THE valley of the Boardman was gathering its purple mists of evening. The sun had gone, the cerise bloom of the sky faded to a pink flush. The river gurgled contentedly in the quiet, its surface rosied in places, polished ebony in others, and here and there flecked by silver as a snag or ripple broke the even flow. A stranger, in black relief, was casting across the stream and above the water hung a myriad of insects, wide, gauzy-winged creatures, the caddis-fly, born at dusk to live its span of minutes and pass on.

Gideon Limes sat alone on the screened porch of the Uneedsumfish Inn staring with unseeing eyes out across that panorama. It was the hour, above all others, to fish. By thousands the expiring flies settled to the water and by scores the fish were feeding. No need for description. You, fishermen, need no words to breed the thrill at memory of plopping, splashing trout as they break evening water to feed, and you, the uninitiated, explanation to you would be meaningless.

Gideon Limes was aware of what transpired, and yet no enthusiasm stirred in him. Last night—another such an evening—the Lunker had struck his fly, hung a frantic moment, and torn loose, but even the prospect of having the great fish on again did not stir him. Life on the river had lost its keen taste.

He could trace the reason back to the hour of his departure, leaving the factory under that stifling sense of being tied. For years he had worked with a perfect office staff; now it was ruined by a love affair with a red-headed whipper-snapper. That had made him irritable. His irritation, he found, made inroads on his luck.

He did not have the necessary patience to fish effectively. His companion rivals picked on him, too, and he writhed under their jibes, choosing now to sulk rather than dominate by sheer bulk. Confound love anyhow, he thought as his mind went back again to the office. He stirred in his chair, swinging the landing net he held to relieve the rancor in his heart.

Footsteps, coming toward him; grasses swishing against boots. He looked up and could barely distinguish the figure of a fellow camper.

"Gid! Oh, Gid!" the man called, and he answered. "Hustle! Somebody's got your big fish on just below the bridge."

Gideon's discontent dissolved suddenly. He slammed the screen door behind him and waddled across the open.

"Who is it?" he called, but the other, the better runner, did not hear.

The pink had gone from the west. Just a silvered sky remained, enabling the identification of figures, not of faces, and as Gideon neared the stream he saw his four companions moving along on his side, other men across the water.

And in the river a man, thigh deep, ran down the languid current in great, floundering strides, heaping the black water into phosphorescent mounds as he went. His right hand held the straining rod and his left paid out line swiftly as he followed the rush of the fish he had hooked. As Gideon came close and started following the course of the river the man slowed his pace, gradually dropping to a walk, giving out line more eagerly, reducing his walk to a reluctant edging along while the bamboo bent and bowed mightily.

Then the tip of the rod vibrated and writhed and a hundred feet below them the water was ripped in a gleaming gash as the frantic fish charged across toward the other bank. Gideon Limes, standing still, held his breath as in sympathetic reaction he clamped his right hand and felt the strain come to bear on the tackle. Then gasped aloud as the fish broke water.

He burst through with a vigor which told of superb strength, of splendid fury. For an instant he was in silhouette against the dead white sky full three feet in the air, a wonderful water-creature taking to an alien element in his battle for liberty. Then, losing rigidity, the fish crashed back, body slapping the surface with its full length, sending out a shower as of new silver coins to spatter for yards about.

And as he went under, the man took in a length of line, quickly, deftly, careful not to bring up slack too suddenly. The tip of the rod bent and quivered again, dipping low before the strain, stiffly pointing out the direction of its quarry while the man braced backward against the ripples, breathing in a low grunt to attest to the tug yonder.

Again the fish leaped; again he crashed down limply, as if to fall on the strand which snared him and break with his weight that which he could not part with his pull. Again and again, until he had displayed himself, a black blotch against the western sky, six times.

Then change; the water quieted. The rod stood straight out, springing lightly, not an ounce of weight there.

"Gone, by heck!" some one cried.

"Gone, like ——!" snorted Gideon Limes. "Look!"

A ribbon of riffle showed, moving swiftly up-stream. The man in the water watched it go, watched it pass him, not a dozen feet away, and all the time his reel ate slack yard upon yard. He turned, following with his eyes the trail of the moving line until he faced up-stream. Then commenced to walk, to run, leaning low against the flow of water and when the trout did strike resistance again his enemy was moving with him, putting the strain on leader, line and rod gradually, carefully, skilfully, so that when the splints were again doubled and a-tremble the tension had come on them easily, not of a sudden.

"Look out for those snags!" Gideon cried, voice betraying his excitement. "Snags and jams all along the other side!"

"Thanks."

In an ordinary tone, quite coolly, the response came from the other as he slowed to a walk and worked in close against the bank to put himself across the stream from the trout, giving the necessary trifle of slack and watching the moving flap of water laid back by the ripping line as his fish drove to and fro, laboring toward the tangle of logs.

Man to fish, fish against man, fighting that superb up-stream fight that the German Brown makes. Giving, taking, each wise in the ways of battle, the fish, close to bottom in his three feet of water putting every ounce into the struggle toward safety so near; the man, deft, collected, displaying that fine repression of effort which marks the master angler, countering move with move, stealing a yard here, yielding a foot there, scheming for a position that would give him a cross-pull on the trout's head to hold it away from its objective.

"You'll lose him; drag him out!" a man across the stream advised.

"It'll be my loss then," evidently nettled by suggestion from the clearly inexpert.

Yet the man gave, inch by inch, moving forward a step, halting, bracing until it seemed as though something must snap, then surrendering another foot; but each time he made that stand it was for a longer duration. The back fin of the Brown showed above the water within a yard of the jam that offered shelter, where he could tangle and break the leader. Another foot the man granted, another hand's breadth.

Minute after minute they fought, in silence now for those who watched spoke but rarely and then in hushed voices. Occasionally the man in the stream grunted or muttered an indistinguishable word. The trout worked back and forth feverishly and the man gave—when he did not want to give—letting the creature wriggle closer into the scant margin which was between him and his haven. The zig-zags became shorter, more frantic; he burrowed for deeper water and the rod segment became more acute.

Then, with a foot, perhaps, to spare, the man braced himself on spread legs, leaned backward and swung the tip of his rod straight upward. It was the crisis and Gideon Limes felt his heart slow with apprehension. Would the tackle stop the fish? Or would it set him free?

The man in the river strained with stilled breathing. Pound by pound he applied the upward pull, considerate of his tackle yet risking all against the resistance of the trout, risking it cautiously and wisely. Deeper grew the dip of the tip. The slender whip of bamboo bent clear to the grip, and still the Brown withstood the drag, wriggling sharply.

CAME the telling moment. The rod vibrated, the line was taut and still as though fast, finally, to the snag itself. So for the space of a deliberate breath, and with a hissing gasp of relief, of triumph, the man was moving with the river, for that last ounce had drawn the fish to the surface, turned him over with a flop and a cuff of the broad tail and headed him with the flow, away from the dangerous jams!

"Goo' boy!" cried Gideon Limes, brandishing the landing net and jogging along through the grass to keep abreast.

For an interval the man sloshed through the water, letting the fish go but holding him just within control. They rounded an easy bend, moving with the current.

"How's the water below?" the man asked, not turning his head.

"Jam clear across thirty rods down—Shallow water—banks clear—look out for hole to left—if he gets to that jam—water awful deep——"

Information rained on him; and Gideon Limes, panting in his effort to make through the brush that now covered the banks, dropped into the water, splashing along a dozen yards behind the fisherman, forgetting the absence of his waders.

A whippoorwill sounded its lonely note. A nighthawk "squnked" as it swooped close over their heads. The gloom deepened; but the afterglow, caught again and flung upward by the water, let them see.

Below was down-timber, clear across the stream. They could hear the laugh of the water as it sported over that obstacle. And the man with the fish began to slow once more, by fine degrees, looking from side to side, working out into mid-stream, where the water reached his hips.

He was deliberate in action now, almost hesitant, always underplaying. And before the others realized, he had checked the flight of his trout, was standing still, stooped forward from the waist, resisting sturdily.

Again the fish leaped, not so high, not with so much verve and display of strength and again the man stole slack as he crashed back on the water. He sulked, working sluggishly over to the right bank. He leaped again, and a third time. Sullen thereafter, keeping close to the bank.

Then he turned and veered for the other side. Back and across, again and again, twisting the rod until he threatened to wrench it to slivers. And to meet that stress the man was again forced to move on down, each step bringing the water higher about him, to his waist—his stomach—half-way to his armpits.

He stopped; still, and with indications of finality. Below was deep water. Once there, no tackle could hold that fish, so again the man forced a crisis, lay back against the current, lifted the tip of his rod and applied that upward pull.

The trout showed a flash of his back, and his tail flung into the air to smack the water. Once more the dark hump, and again the arc described by the tail time after time, end over end, rolling like a hoop, head chasing tail, tail flaying out in frantic effort, the fish, in a hysteria of rage, strove to break down the man's strength.

It did not avail. In a flash he was speeding up-stream. He reached the end of the line, hesitated an instant and swept back with the current. Then, across, then up once more, that time near the other bank, while the man, always facing his fish, took in a foot at a time, satisfied to win slowly, never yielding, now.

On the bank the watchers stood silent. ~~In the stream~~ Gideon Limes shivered unconsciously from the night damp and let mosquitoes feed on his fat neck without protest. His mouth was dry, eyes aching from the strain of following the fight.

"You got him now!" he rumbled and when the other did not answer, repeated: "You got him now. Here, let me help," waving the landing-net.

"Stay out! Watch!"

The other snapped out the words for the fish had turned and, back-fin showing, charged up the river. He went beyond his captor. He passed Gideon. He swung toward mid-current and Limes floundered, stepping high as he felt the line tighten about his legs. Somehow he got free without disaster, panting audibly.

"Now, if you can keep out of the way," the other said with stinging dispassionateness, "I'll try to land this fish."

Gideon muttered something. He did not know what. His thrill covered wholly his humiliation.

Another quarter hour passed. The moon was shining, silvering the stream, letting them follow every tired move of the drowning trout. Up and down, in short spasmodic flights, devoid of sweep or power, he went. Now and then his yellow belly flashed as he turned on his side. At no interval was he wholly submerged. Five—ten minutes the man toyed with him so, adding caution to caution. Then reeling in slowly, confidently, leading the fish gently about at his leader's length, he dipped his net and waded toward shore, a dripping, glistening weight in the mesh.

"Holy smoke, what a fish!" some one cried. "Come on to the shack; let's look at him in the light."

Fighting it over again, talking all at once, they trailed across the misty flat toward the Uneedsumfish Inn and in their wake Gideon moved heavily. Reaction had set in. For years he had dreamed of taking that fish and now he realized that he never could have taken him. It wasn't in his mind or body to fish as this man had fished. He was not born to it. He remembered the sharp rebuke, and suddenly he felt quite inferior—inferior and depressed.

They were clustered about the lighted lamp when he entered. In its glow lay the great trout, wide-eyed, gasping. Bright yellow was his belly, color deepening as it swept up his goodly girth to his rich brown back. The darker spots on him were big, clearly cut and the red dots stood out vividly from the more somber shadings—a superb specimen, crowding thirty inches, six firm pounds! Gideon's little gray eyes sparkled again as he gazed upon the trout. Then he lifted that gaze to the white, elated face of the stranger.

His jaw dropped. Incredulously he held out a hand.

"Kirk!" he cried. "Kirk, my boy! When the devil—how in—why——"

He pumped Washington's hand and looked about into the faces of the other admirers with rising triumph.

"You're friends?" one of his companions asked, perhaps enviously.

"Friends"—drawing himself up—"why, he's my right-hand man in the office. By the Lord Harry, it took somebody from that office to show you fellas up, to let you know what real fishing is."

"His vacation, you see—" looking at the youth, a peculiar flush on his own face—"he'll stay until my time's up. We'll go back to work together."

He slapped Kirk on the shoulders.

"By the Lord Harry, boy, you've caught my fish—and—" meeting the blue eyes—"you've hooked something else of mine. But there 're as good fish in the Boardman as ever 've been caught and that's true of everything—men, and women—stenographers and all those things."

THE PEARL OF TORRES

by Louis Esson

WHEN Ted Jarrett, of New York City, drifted into the picturesque pearling village by Torres Straits, the monotony of life had just been relieved by a little shooting affair. The chief actor was Leon Rod, a jewel-buyer, who traveled between Thursday Island and the scattered villages on the coast, engaging divers, arranging outfits and occasionally buying pearls. He had engaged two Malays, Muda and Tuah, as divers for one of the big fleet owners; but when they had signed the contract, and each received ten pounds in advance, they formed the plan to slip away to the Aroe Islands, in Dutch waters, that had not been fished so much as Torres Straits.

This simple scheme miscarried, because one night the Malays got so gloriously drunk and talkative, that they let out their secret. "Big" Bailey, the police constable, arrested the culprits, and locked them up in the ramshackle jail. The Malays promptly escaped, and went to interview Rod, who was smoking a cigar on the hotel veranda. In the midst of their vociferous explanations, Rod suddenly drew a revolver and fired. Tuah fell, shot through the heart, and Muda, with a scream, dashed down the street and disappeared. When a crowd gathered 'round the dead body of the Malay, Rod was quietly smoking a cigar.

"It was his own fault," he said indifferently.

Ted Jarrett entered the little shanty, a wooden building, with a galvanized iron roof, known by the grandiloquent title of the Cape York Hotel, just in time to pick up the tag end of the story. Rod, who was angry at losing his commission, declared that the Malays had run *amok*. Muda had not been seen since. He might have been in hiding, meditating revenge, or perhaps he had slipped away to the Aroe Islands after all.

The American ordered drinks for the crowd. The girl serving behind the bar was a French girl from San Francisco, and Ted wondered how she came to be there in such strange surroundings, for there is no more cosmopolitan crowd on earth than the pearlers of Torres Straits.

A smiling Chinese handed 'round the drinks.

"Good luck!" cried the pearlers, draining their glasses.

"Good luck!" said Jarrett.

In the bar-room were many races of white men, Anglo-Saxons, Danes, Russians, and different varieties of Southern Europeans; while in the streets could be found Chinese, Japanese, Indian Mohammedans, Singhalese, Malays, Kanakas, Filipinos, Australian blacks, and various nondescripts, white, brown, black, yellow, and every shade between.

Pearling is a fascinating pursuit, and draws adventurers from the ends of the earth.

It had drawn Ted Jarrett from a lawyer's office in New York City, and cast him into the Outer Spaces. Ted was twenty-five years old, and already had been twice 'round the world; but each time, on his return, his father gave him good sensible advice, and sent him back to the heavy law books which he detested. Ted knew he would never cut much of a figure in the legal profession, so, on his father's death, three years before, he abandoned office work, and spent most of the little fortune he had inherited in a trade enterprise in Mexico. But his heart was not in the business, and he sold out at a loss.

Ted was a big strong, athletic young man, well educated and full of energy; but too good-natured to be a lawyer, and too easy going to make a successful merchant. So far he had failed in everything; and Evelyn Ward, a young society beauty with whom he thought he was in love, told him, one Summer's evening, after dinner at a stylish Broadway restaurant, that, unless he turned over a new leaf, and made a success of something, his attentions would be no longer welcome.

Ted's face took on a sterner outline.

"I suppose you think I'm a failure?" he said.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"What else can I think? One can't live on romantic dreams."

"I was foolish enough to think that we could," Ted replied, with a dry laugh.

When they finally parted that night, Ted had already made his plans, though Evelyn had given him no definite promise. She would never marry a poor man, for it needed money, and plenty of money, to give her the only life she cared about, the gay and brilliant life of New York society. If he failed there was no more to be said; and if he succeeded, well, he might take his chance with the rest of her admirers.

Next day Ted put his affairs in order, and with a steamer ticket and a few thousand dollars in his pocket, caught the train for Frisco, where he meant to set out to seek his fortune in the islands of the South.

For some months he knocked 'round the islands, making little more money than he spent, but enjoying life in his usual light-hearted way; but one night at Suva, in the club, he met a man who told him of the pearling at Torres Straits, and his imagination was so kindled that he caught the next boat for Sydney, and from there went north, past the Great Barrier Reef, to Thursday Island. A few days later he went over to the mainland, determined to fit out a lugger and reap a rich harvest of pearls.

In the Cape York Hotel there was much talk of sudden strokes of fortune, good and evil, of thieving divers, of the fatuity of politicians, and of the sin, sweat, and sorrow of that particular torrid township.

The conversation like the crowd, was mixed; but Jarrett soon got his bearings.

He learned that, on an average, the shell was as profitable as the pearls; but every man who went out in a lugger clung to the hope that some unusually fine pearls would fall to his lot. It was always the pearl that might be, not the shell that was, that attracted adventurous fleet-owners.

A Dutchman, from Java, and an Italian had a heated argument about the respective merits of the Aroe Islands and Torres Straits. A good case was made for both sides; but an old Queensland pearler maintained that the Torres shell was the best in the world.

"That will do for me, then," said Jarrett.

"But it's harder to find," remarked the jewel-buyer.

"All the more fun," replied the young American.

Li, the stolid Chinese "boy" kept carrying 'round the drinks.

The girl behind the bar, who was called Suzette, seemed to Ted much too delicate a picture for such a rough-set frame. She had an expressive face, a clear skin tinted a delicate olive by the sun, eyes soft and brown, but with a merry laugh in them, and a great mass of blue-black hair. Her figure was slight and graceful; and Ted could not help noticing the good taste of her dress, a simple frock of some dark, semi-transparent material, suitable for the tropics, but with a touch of coquetry in its scarlet belt that matched the red flower in her hair.

Leon Rod, a handsome middle-aged man of unknown nationality—he might have been anything, for he had traveled the world, and spoke several languages fluently—sat at a little table sipping a liqueur. He raised his glass to Suzette.

"*A tes beaux yeux!*"

Suzette wrinkled her dainty little nose.

Rod walked over to the bar, caught her wrist, and whispered something in French. Suzette's cheeks blazed with shame and indignation. Rod laughed, and bent over to kiss her, when Ted Jarrett grabbed him by the shoulders, wheeled him 'round, and then pushed him violently to the door. Rod was a heavy and powerful man, but he was taken by surprise by the American's quickness and dexterity.

The crowd laughed at the little incident; but as Leon Rod stumbled out of the door on to the veranda, a revolver shot passed just over his shoulder and buried itself in the wall. There was a rush to the door.

"It was Muda," cried Big Bailey, the constable, "having a crack at Rod."

There was a scene of disorder. Suzette was forgotten. The pearlers ran in different directions, but there was no sign of the Malay. Muda had escaped again.

THE lugger was drifting across the glittering Straits.

Ted Jarrett was now a full-blown pearler. It was a day of perfect beauty, and the thrill of the tropics fired his blood. Pearling, he thought, was a splendid game. His money had gone, but what of that? A good haul of shell would pay all expenses, and the pearls he found would be clear profit.

He had leased the foreshore from a more or less paternal Government, and used the site for his own shack, a shell shed, and a place for overhauling his boats.

Ted felt rather pleased with himself. But what would Evelyn think, he wondered, if she saw him in such a place, and in such a costume. It would be difficult to turn him into a society man again. He loved adventure, untamed lands, tropic seas, strange people, and the big, vague dreams of the wanderer. Had he the soul of a beach-comber, after all?

This, he had to admit, was the life that suited him, and though his financial position was not exactly rosy, he was in excellent health and spirits. His lugger was not yet fully paid up, and he was depending on a haul to clear himself; but he was a born adventurer, undaunted by circumstances, and buoyed up by the hopes of youth.

Ted reveled in the pearling. His lugger, fitted up with a dingey, pump, and diving-gear, had a small but resourceful crew. He was proud of Utimaro, a little Jap, who was one of the most daring divers of Torres Straits. Though slightly built, Utimaro was strong and sinewy, and there was no question of his skill and courage. He was absolutely cold-blooded, and if the prospects were good, there was no risk he would refuse to take. He was a silent little man, more respected than loved by the rest of the crew. Why he had offered him his services at a moderate wage was a mystery to Jarrett.

Besides Utimaro there was another Jap, Sato, the "tender," whose job it was to answer the diver's signals, and keep the pipes and ropes free while he was under water. Malays kept the pumps going, and the fifth man, a Levantine Greek, who was no diver, acted as cook and general handy man.

The divers had struck a good patch of shell. Utimaro returned from the bottom of the sea with his bag filled, and sat for a moment enjoying the fresh breeze. One of the Malays then stepped into the diving-dress and was lowered down.

Ted had admired the diving of Utimaro, and his eyes still followed the little man, who went aft to the pile of shells. He noticed the Jap had a piece of wire which he slipped away quickly as Ted crossed over.

"What's that, Utimaro?"

The Jap looked up with a scowl.

"What's the game?"

The Jap did not reply.

Ted looked at the shells, and found that some had been stacked on edge in the sun, so that the oyster would open easily, and allow a big pearl to be fished for with a piece of wire. This was a favorite device with the colored divers, who have a good eye for an oyster likely to contain a pearl.

"That'll do, Utimaro," said Ted, "I'll open the rest myself."

Now he knew why Utimaro had been so willing to work for him. Ted was a new man at the game.

"Utimaro!" called one of the Malays.

It was again the Jap's turn to dive.

Utimaro looked over the ship's side.

"Too deep," he muttered at last, "it is not the law."

There is a law against diving below a certain depth; but Utimaro had never been known to refuse before. His obvious intention was to pay Jarrett back for discovering his tampering with the shells.

"This is your last chance, Utimaro. If you quit now, you'll have to find another job." But the Jap would not dive.

The shell was so good, that Ted Jarrett determined on going down himself. He had full confidence in his crew, and knew the Malays would keep an eye on Utimaro. When he got into the dress, and the heavy helmet was screwed on, he felt far from comfortable. His ears buzzed; then he heard a loud bang, caused by the compressed air striking his ear-drums. But Ted, who had no thought of consequences, was going to see it through. He stepped down the ladder attached to the side of the boat, and then cast himself off. He went down to the bottom by the plumper which, along with the life-line, was held by the silent Japanese tender.

When he reached the floor of the ocean, Ted was dazzled by the enchantment of the scene, that looked as beautiful and unreal as a fairy palace. He saw the most exquisite shells, of every shape and color, trees made out of coral, delicate fishes flashing among the marine growths, curious flowers and ferns of the sea. But he had no time to indulge his sense of wonder. He kept his eyes fixed on one object only—shell.

Overhead the lugger drifted, dragging him on, and quickly he gathered the large oysters, and dropped them into his bag. Utimaro was right, they had certainly struck a patch. Ted filled his bag, gave the signal to be hauled up, and rose quickly to the surface. Sato unscrewed the helmet; and Ted sat down exhausted, eagerly filling his lungs with the fresh air. Utimaro did not speak; but the Malays grinned, for the young American's grit had impressed them.

Ted gave the word to return home, lay back exhausted on the deck, and lit his pipe.

The lugger danced over the waves.

It was a day for dreams. In the drowsy tropic afternoon the scene was a picture of delight, with the burning blue of the sea and sky, the red beach at the foot of the cliffs, and the white roofs of the houses peeping amid the vivid green foliage of the coconut, poinciana, and the palm trees. The air was warm, but a light breeze blew across the sea.

Ted sat up. For some weeks luck had gone against him. There was not a pearl in every shell, Ted soon discovered, nor in every hundred shells. It was a gamble, but the lure was irresistible. Now he had discovered Utimaro's trick, his prospects seemed brighter. At any moment a man might make a fortune.

With a flat, thin-bladed knife, he started on the shells he had just dived for himself. The opening of every oyster was an exciting experiment.

Quickly he opened shell after shell, putting any gems he found into a little tin box.

He had suffered many disappointments. At first he thought that every oyster contained a pearl of some kind, and he mistook every bright bubble for one. Often he thought it was real till the knife proved his error—the bubble burst.

The little box was half-filled with pearls, mostly baroques, ill-shaped gems of comparatively small value, yet serving to encourage the hope that the rare pearl, Evelyn's pearl, might yet be found.

As he opened shell after shell, finding only a bubble or a baroque, he would just curse, and tackle another pile.

"Better luck next time," he would say.

As the lugger was nearing the shore, he picked up a big oyster, inserted his knife at the "lip" of the shell, and cut through the strong central muscle that bound the flat and round sides together. His knife touched something that made his heart jump with excitement.

It was a beautiful pearl. It was big, perfectly round, with a smooth skin and delicate iridescent luster. Ted could hardly believe his eyes, for never before had he seen anything like it. There was no pearl to match it in the gem-shops of Thursday Island. What was the worth of that little sphere of nacre? Ted examined it carefully. Who could say? A fine pearl is like a fine picture, it is something unique, beyond price, it becomes a matter of fancy, of artistic taste. Well, if it were sold for twenty, twenty-five, thirty thousand dollars, Ted thought it would be cheap.

But he had no intention of selling this pearl. He had worked for it, he had crossed the world to find it, he had dived for it himself, and he felt proud of his efforts.

Utimaro stood unobserved behind him.

When Ted looked up the Jap was pointing to the little jetty the lugger was approaching.

"At last," Ted reflected, "I have something to show, a perfect pearl, a queen of gems, worthy to hang as a pendant on the white throat of a New York beauty."

The lugger touched the jetty.

Ted hid the pearl in his belt.

NEXT evening as the moon was rising, Ted Jarrett stepped out of his shack, and ran down the beach for a swim.

He told nobody of the precious pearl he had found, and he thought nobody knew. Before going down to the sea, he looked carefully 'round the shack, and slipped the little leather bag, containing the pearl, into a hole in the wall.

As he was enjoying his swim, Sato, the Japanese tender approached, and, when

Ted came out of the water, handed him a note. It came from New York, and he recognized Evelyn's handwriting.

As he hastily dressed he was surprised to find how slightly moved he was. New York, was very far away, and somehow the lights of Broadway were less alluring than the moonlight on the lonely sea.

He tore open the letter, glanced at it hastily, and was about to return when Sato, who had been waiting patiently, asked him a question about the lugger.

While he was reading the letter from New York, and giving Sato some directions for the next day, a small brown figure, which had been hiding behind the low bushes at the foot of the cliff, crept into the shack. It was Utimaro. He went straight to the hole in the wall, opened the bag, and took out the pearl, and then glided off into the bushes like a snake into its hole. He wriggled along the sands till he reached the cliff, scrambled up the jagged rocks and disappeared.

Dismissing Sato, Jarrett, with the letter in his hand, returned slowly and thoughtfully to the shack.

He threw himself into a low chair, and, while the kettle was boiling, he again read Evelyn's brief note. It destroyed his last illusions about her. She took it for granted that he was a failure as usual, and would never make a success of pearling. Shell had fallen a hundred dollars a ton—she had made inquiries. She would be pleased with a pearl from Torres, if it were a fine one; but fine pearls were rare, and fortune was not likely to favor him.

Her light chatter of automobiles, dances and supper parties, and the artificial pleasures that could be bought by wealth, jarred on the young man, who saw clearly that she was more interested in his fortune than in himself. The pearl he had striven for, surely it was never destined for such a cold and calculating woman!

As he sat, dreaming for hours in the tropic night, he realized how strangely satisfied he was with his lot. He liked the life, and the motley, adventurous crowd that gathered o' nights in the little shanty. Suzette, who was treated by the pearlers with a rough, but genuine courtesy, seemed to take no special notice of him. After the incident with Rod, he felt rather shy in her presence, keeping somewhat aloof, with a chivalrous care not to presume on her gratitude.

He often wondered at her refinement, but he learned that she was the daughter of a cultured man, though a ne'er-do-well, a French engineer, who had traveled the world seeking his fortune, and at last come to Thursday Island. Later he crossed to Cape York, and opened the little hotel, though most of his time he spent pearling. One night his lugger went out, but it never returned. That was two years ago. Suzette kept on the shanty, saving her little money, so that she could return to her mother's people in San Francisco.

She was quite unlike the selfish, superficial Evelyn. She had known suffering; that was part of her charm. The diamond is struck from the hard inanimate rock, but the pearl is born of pain—that was the difference between them. The New York girl was hard, cold, brilliant, a society beauty—a diamond; Suzette was soft and subtle, one who had known suffering, but with a depth of color, a delicate enchantment—a pearl.

"Yes, a pearl," he reflected, "the pearl of Torres."

IT WAS a quiet time in the Cape York Hotel. Suzette was sitting in a rocking-chair, pensively knitting, when Leon Rod came in. He seemed greatly excited.

"Wine, Suzette," he cried, "I must drink."

Suzette rose, and brought a small bottle of champagne. The wine sparkled gaily in the glass. As he lifted it to his lips, he gazed boldly at Suzette, who flushed and walked away.

Leon Rod laughed, drained his glass, and called for more wine.

"I have good news," he said, "good news, *chérie.*"

When Suzette brought another bottle he leaned across the table and spoke eagerly.

"Listen! At last fortune has been kind to me. I am going to leave this infernal country. I have seen enough, too much. What have we here—fever, heat, flies, dirt—and as for the people, they're the very scum of the earth. Bah! It's a terrible life. But I'm through with it, do you hear, Suzette? I have my fortune, and now I go."

Suzette watched him closely.

"You have been buying pearls?" she asked.

"*Mais oui.* I have bought pearls."

"Where have they come from? The American has found very few."

Leon Rod lit a cigaret.

"He has found very few," he laughed. "That is so."

"You are much cleverer," said Suzette, moving away.

"I am not a shell-hunter, I am a connoisseur."

The jewel expert brought out a little case from his pocket. He opened it, and Suzette saw it was filled with a choice collection of gems.

"I am an expert," he said, "These pearls are small, but very fine. Would they not make a pretty necklace, Suzette?"

Rod was in an eager, amorous mood, and Suzette became curious as to his designs.

"What are you going to do with the pearls?" the girl asked.

"I will sell them at the right time."

"Here?"

"No! In the best market, London, Paris, New York. I have done with Torres. How I have suffered in this hell-hole! And you must have suffered too, Suzette. But tomorrow I sail away. Singapore, Colombo, Port Said, Marseilles, and then Paris, Paris—the boulevards, the theaters, the cafés—Paris; think of that, think what Paris means to a man of wealth! That will be my life. Will you come with me?"

The girl's eyes flashed.

"The wine has gone to your head, *m'sieu.*"

"It is not the wine, it is you, *ma belle.* Do you know Utimaro?"

"*Oui, m'sieu.*"

"He, too, is one of my agents. I have fooled the American."

Suzette trembled.

"Come, let us have a glass together!" said Rod.

Suzette hesitated a moment. Since the night Ted Jarrett had defended her, she had thought only of him; but her love was hidden deep in her heart like a pearl in the sea. She felt that it was hopeless; yet now he was being cheated, she would risk anything to find out Rod's schemes.

Setting her teeth tight she brought a large bottle of champagne, and a glass for herself. She sat down at the little table opposite Leon Rod, who filled both glasses with the sparkling wine. Suzette touched the glass with her lips.

"Tell me about it," she said. "It must be amusing. You are not drinking."

Rod raised his glass.

"Gem-buying is an art," he replied, jocosely. "It is much better than fitting out a lugger. I have the choice of the spoil from many luggers, and I buy very cheap, not always from the fleet owners, you may be sure. It is a dangerous game, now Big Bailey is on the lookout, but I have a little arrangement with the best of the colored divers."

"Ah, that is how you manage," said Suzette, with a little jerky laugh, as she refilled his glass.

"*Mais oui.* I love you, Suzette." Leon Rod leaned over the table trying to grasp the girl's hand. "Tonight I am going to buy one more pearl, the finest of all."

"Who found it?" she asked.

Leon Rod winked knowingly.

"Utimaro. He stole it from the American." Rod, who was now flushed with wine, whispered confidentially, "I shall meet Utimaro on the beach, when I get the word from Sato."

"Is it a very fine pearl?" the girl inquired innocently.

"It is perfect. I saw it only for a moment, for the Jap would not hand it over till he got the money."

"Will you have to pay him a great deal?"

"No. How else can he sell it? The Chinese store-keepers would know it was stolen, and give him little, and nobody else dares to buy from the colored divers. They all have to come to Leon Rod. I am the friend of the poor."

Suzette was shivering with excitement, but she kept filling Rod's glass.

"You will come with me," he cried, "you will voyage as my wife. We will lead the gay life, ah, Paris, Paris!"

At this moment Sato came in, handed Rod a slip of paper, and then silently went out. Rod's eyes gleamed.

"Let me see!" cried Suzette.

Rod laughingly showed her the note, which was in code.

Some of the pearlers were now entering, and Suzette put away the champagne glasses. The men called for drinks and cards.

Leon Rod looked at his watch, and pulled himself together with a start. He rose, crumpling the note in his hand, and bowed to Suzette.

"*A demain,*" he said significantly, as he left the room.

At once Suzette called Li, the Chinese "boy," told him to look after the place, and then, without pausing to slip a shawl over her head, she left the shanty, and walked quickly to the beach.

"THE PEARL of Torres," murmured Ted softly.

His long reverie was interrupted by a cry from Suzette. With loosened hair, and sparkling eyes, she told her story, rapidly but clearly, her pale hands flashing to and fro in pretty and expressive gestures.

Jarrett listened intently.

"But I have the pearl!" he cried.

Suzette looked surprised.

"Here it is," he said, taking the bag from its hiding-place. He opened it and started. The pearl was gone.

"It is stolen!" cried Suzette.

The young American smiled grimly. So Utimaro had been spying on him! But he would recover that stolen pearl, for it meant something to him—now. He looked at the little French girl in admiration.

"Why have you done all this for me?"

Suzette seemed agitated.

"I must go, *m'sieu.*"

As they were speaking they caught sight of a small figure, gliding along the beach. Jarrett made a sudden move.

"Be careful," whispered Suzette.

"I'll see who it is," said Ted, "I want that pearl."

"Keep to the cliff," said Suzette, as she hurried away, "*adieu.*"

Ted Jarrett was too excited to notice how she slipped off. Fixing his eyes on the small brown figure whose movements were so suspicious, he kept to the cliff, walking behind the bushes. The man, who was creeping along the beach below, by a familiar gesture revealed himself to Jarrett as the diver, Utimaro.

It was before a cave in the rocks that Utimaro stopped, and looked 'round. In a few minutes he was joined by another man, sauntering leisurely along, and smoking a fragrant cigar. It was Leon Rod.

From his vantage ground on the cliff Ted Jarrett could see them distinctly. Carefully he approached nearer, hiding behind some rocks and bushes, till he hung straight over the precipice. The men had entered the cave, and were sitting on a boulder. For some time they looked closely at each other, but at last Utimaro displayed the jewel, and handed it over to the illicit buyer. Rod talked volubly, offering a price; but the face of the Jap was set and stern.

"It will not do," he said.

"But let me explain, Utimaro——"

"No explanation."

Rod held up the pearl.

"It is big, and has a good skin, that I admit—but it is not perfect. I am an expert."

"I, too," said the Jap, with a scowl.

"My best price is one hundred pounds."

"Five," snapped the Jap.

"Impossible, my friend, impossible."

Utimaro remained silent. Then he held out his hand.

"Give me the pearl. I no sell."

Rod put it in his pocket.

"Listen, Utimaro," he said, holding out a bank note, "take your money."

"No! I will have the pearl. It is mine."

"Listen!"

The Jap rose quietly.

"We talk no more," he said.

Rod knocked the ash from his cigar.

"The pearl!" cried Utimaro, making a spring; but Rod was too quick for him, his hand was on his automatic and he fired.

Utimaro fell against the boulder, blood spurting from his throat.

When Rod saw that Utimaro was dead, he left the body where it fell, and stepped quickly out of the cave. He threw the incriminating weapon far into the sea, and set out along the sand.

Jarrett followed, and as the beach made a sudden curve about a quarter of a mile from the cave, he swung himself over the edge of the cliff, and dropped lightly on to the sand. Rod started as Jarrett met him face to face.

"What do you want?" he cried angrily.

"My pearl," said Jarrett.

Rod, who though slower in movement was the heavier man, closed with him, and together they swayed backward and forward, each trying in vain for a successful throw. At last Jarrett broke away, and met his opponent's rush with a straight left. Some blows were exchanged; and then Jarrett, making a feint, tempted Rod to smash in a heavy right; but the blow fell short, and Jarrett, making the most of his chance landed a well-timed hook on the point of the jaw. The big man staggered and fell heavily.

Jarrett waited for him to rise, but Rod did not move. His eyes were shut, and Jarrett thought it was a knock-out blow. As he bent over and took the jewel from Rod's pocket, suddenly a knife flashed in his face, gashing his forehead. It was a treacherous blow, but the ruse succeeded. Rod cautiously raised himself, and picked up the fatal pearl.

Jarrett lay helpless on the sands, and then lost consciousness.

BACK IN the shanty Suzette became impatient. The American had not returned. She confided her fears to Big Bailey, the police officer, who immediately made ready for action.

"I've had my eye on Rod for some time," he said. "This illicit pearl buying is turning too many good divers into thieves, and ruining the industry."

"I'll go with you," said Suzette.

"Come along, then," he growled, in a bluff, good-natured way.

They left the pearlers drinking and playing cards, slipped out quietly, and made for the beach.

As they reached the cliffs they were startled by the splendor of the tropic moonlight that bathed the lonely sea and shore in brilliant light. The night was soft, but as clear as day, and every object could be plainly distinguished. Suzette uttered a little cry, her heart beating fast. On the sands two figures had been struggling. She recognized Ted Jarrett, the young American, and Leon Rod, kneeling beside the body.

Rod picked up the pearl, and then rose and walked quickly along the beach. But he did not go far. A little boat touched the shore. A dark figure rushed out, came behind Rod, and plunged a *kris* between his shoulder blades. Rod fell forward on the sand and stirred no more.

It was a weird scene.

"Quick!" cried Suzette.

As they stood on the cliff, the dark figure made for the sea. It was Muda, the Malay. He seemed to know what he was doing. He got into his little boat, and pushed off across the glassy sea.

Bailey helped Suzette down the cliff-side. The girl ran along the wet sand in her thin little shoes. She bent over the body of Jarrett, who opened his eyes and smiled.

"*Bon Dieu.*" exclaimed Suzette, with a sigh of relief.

Jarrett staggered to his feet. He looked ghastly in the moonlight with his white face, and his hair clotted with blood; yet his wound was not so deadly as it appeared to Suzette. The knife had struck the bone; but it had not penetrated. It was an ugly gash, but it would soon heal.

Big Bailey was examining the body of Rod, when Ted Jarrett, leaning on Suzette's arm, managed to stumble across the sands.

"I sure knocked him out," he said, bewildered at the sight, "but don't say I killed him."

"He's dead all right," replied Bailey, "but don't you worry. We saw the finish."

Suzette pointed over the sea, where the Malay was far out in his little boat.

"Muda took a hand," said Bailey, "a Malay is a man of one idea, and he has a long memory. Muda waited for his chance."

Jarrett picked up the pearl. It was a beauty as it gleamed in the moonlight.

"How lovely!" exclaimed Suzette.

"It is for you," said Jarrett.

"*Non, non, m'sieu.*"

"*Mais oui.*" Jarrett persisted; but his small stock of inferior French soon gave out, so he whispered something in her ear, in his own language.

Big Bailey, a diplomat in his way, had turned his back on the pair and was looking across the sea.

The girl shook her head.

"You must keep this pearl of Torres," she said. "You have fought for it, and won it."

"You are the pearl of Torres," he said softly. "You are the only pearl I want."

Suzette blushed.

"Well," cried the American desperately, "if you won't take the pearl, will you take me?"

Suzette did not reply; but the light in her eyes told him what he wanted to know.

Big Bailey half turned 'round, remarking casually:

"He's making for one of the islands. Guess I'll let him go."

The night was calm, the sea a mirror of silver. The Malay's boat was now a speck in the distance. Muda had had his revenge.

THE SKIDI FEED THE EVENING STAR

by Hugh Pendexter

Author of "Yancey of the Rangers," "Red Toll," etc.

LITTLE PAWNEE VILLAGE on the upper reaches of the Arkansas was preparing to pass the pipe from left to right, the order observed in a "medicine smoke," and Black Buffalo, as Murty the trader was called, a close companion of Chief White Hair, knew the tribal rules would not permit his attendance. So while White Hair and the priests and leading men filed into the medicine lodge the trader rode down the river trail to the sod-house he and Joe Clay had used for four years as a trading-post. Before leaving the village he promised White Hair he would return with whisky after the medicine had been made.

In truth, the Pawnees on the Arkansas in the Spring of 1832 were in need of strong medicine. In the preceding Fall they had exterminated a small band of Dakota hunting buffalo on the Republican and a fear of reprisal had held the village back from securing its own supply of meat. It was imperative that their maize and beans and pumpkins return bumper crops this year.

Claiming all the territory from the Niobra on the North to the Arkansas in the south it resulted they were almost constantly at war with the mighty Siouan tribes above the Platte, or with the Osage, Comanche, Arapaho or Kiowa on the south and west. One, or several of these tribes, was repeatedly assailing them. They returned blow for blow and held their own till the white man opened his long trail through their country to the southwest, when, although they did not yet realize it, their fate as a warring nation was sealed.

Murty and Clay were types of the fearless men who ventured far beyond the frontier. They risked their lives just as did the half-wild "mountain-men," as the trappers were styled. But while the same vital element of dauntless courage held trader and trapper to their hazardous callings, the latter was often sustained by his lust for adventure, his love for penetrating the unknown; the trader was a sullen rock, stubbornly holding his place and risking all for dross. The only bond between Murty and his partner was their mutual love of profits.

Murty was a huge, swart animal, as cruel and primitive as his boon companions, the savages. Clay was from New Hampshire and would always be an alien to the wild environment of the Arkansas. He dared all his partner dared without possessing the latter's brutal disregard for danger. Murty found Indian life and manners peculiarly satisfying to his crude tastes. He had no visions of returning East and sloughing off his wild ways. Clay, frail of physique, was upheld by a fixed desire to gain wealth for what it would purchase in the land of wooden houses. He dreamed much of his amiable native hills. When he fraternized with the savages it was from motives of policy. He did not like them. They tolerated him because of his partner.

The lack of harmony between the two had rapidly grown pronounced during the last half-year. Clay insisted that by identifying themselves so closely with White Hair's people they were incurring the hatred of the other tribes. More than once he complained because Murty took some part in a daring raid, bedecked and painted like a Pawnee, a gay handkerchief concealing the only attribute lacking in his appearance —the peculiar scalp-lock, standing erect like a horn. On such occasions of fault-finding Murty advised him to mind his own business, and continued spending his time at the village.

For two years Clay had planned to sever his connections with Murty and return East. A double motive restrained him; his greed for one more season's profits and his fear of attempting the long journey down the Arkansas alone. Murty, appreciating his uncanny genius for trade, continually painted the horrors sure to overtake him did he set out alone.

"If it wa'n't f'r me ye wouldn't last ten minutes without a knife through yer ribs," he was wont to sneer when Clay voiced his desire to quit the soul-blighting vocation.

Sometimes, when half-drunk, he dropped more ominous words and led Clay to infer he was not even safe from the Pawnees once he broke off with Black Buffalo. The day he returned from the village to await the end of the medicine smoke he drank heavily and brought up the old subject of Clay's withdrawal. He was in an unusually nasty mood. Clay suddenly declared he would not spend another Winter on the river. With a string of oaths Murty promptly retorted he would withdraw his protection if he "heard any more o' that."

In desperation Clay flared back:

"You keep piling it on that if I want to live I've got to agree to everything you say. Be I your slave, or not?"

Heretofore Murty had taken care not to goad his partner too far, but the trade whisky had destroyed his sense of proportion, and he roughly replied:

"I reckon that's 'bout th' size of it. If ye're a free man, strike out f'r th' settlements."

Clay made no response to this challenge. With sickening force the truth came home to him. Throughout the day he silently sat in the doorway while Murty drank and slept. Next morning Murty was early astir and galloping up the trail. Clay cleared away the tin plates and sat down outside the door and smoked and thought. He had shied away from the ugly fact; now he faced it. He was Murty's slave.

Should he start alone down the river a host of redskins, probably led by his partner would soon overtake him. Should he by some rare chance win free to the settlements he must go empty-handed. All the furs piled up in the post and cached in a small cave across the river would remain an undivided spoil for his partner. A great misery settled over his soul. He was home-sick for the East.

His yearning to go back home had been uncommonly keen that Spring. He had visited the village when the first rumble of thunder initiated the series of sacred ceremonies which the Pawnees would keep up till Winter. He did not go again that season. For four years he had stuck to the post, wearing his soul threadbare. Now he was weary of it all, weary unto death. On first coming to the country he had been mildly interested in the practices and beliefs of the Indians.

White Hair—so called because of a streak of grayish-white hair through the middle of his scalp-lock—was more astute than the average savage, but Clay, abstemious by nature, quickly sickened of his drunken orgies with Murty. He inwardly derided as the priests proclaimed the supreme power of Tirawa. His mind, though tainted, retained its New England poise. It returned to the old order of thought more insistently as the years passed. Whereas he had laughed at the heathenish nonsense, now he hotly spurned it.

When he first discovered his partner's credulity concerning the Pawnee belief in supernatural animals he had felt amused. By degrees he came to resent it.

Murty thought like an Indian. Their pagan beliefs found a quick response in his crude mind. He combined the credulity of the child and the ferocity of the brute. His first serious quarrel with Clay resulted from the latter's contemptuous comments on a Nahurac lodge—a place where the Pawnee believed animals met to hold councils. Murty firmly believed White Hair's old father had been placed under the protection and tutelage of bears when a child, which accounted for certain alleged bear traits in his old age.

Clay ridiculed such notions and absorbed nothing from his savage environment except a trick of throwing a sprig of cedar on the fire when the tempest scoured the valley of the Arkansas. There was no doubt in his mind but that cedar would turn lightning aside.

He pocketed his pipe but continued scowling at the wooded loneliness of the river bank. How he hated it! Not only was he Murty's slave, but also the slave of every ash thicket and cotton-wood growth; of every Indian whim and superstition. He hated the somber wood, the emptiness of the river, the earth lodge behind him. He even hated the tiny patch of beans and pumpkins he had planted back of the post.

"—— him! I'm his nigger sure enough!" he finally exploded aloud. "I've lost four years of life just to live out here and work for him. If I make a break he'll cut my throat in a second. I've got to wait here till he dies."

He fell back from the sinister prompting this last thought engendered. Yet the idea persisted and fascinated, even while frightening him.

There was no doubt about it; he possessed the power to terminate Murty's evil influence. All he needed to do was to place a fresh percussion cap on the rifle inside the door. There was never a minute when they were together that Murty was on his guard. And it was such a simple expedient! For five minutes the potentials of the homicide braced him up and gave him an air of dignity as he pictured himself the master of his own fate. Murty stood between him and a return home, but Murty could be eliminated at any time.

An inner voice taunted—

"But how would you get away after killing him?"

His vision of freedom flew to pieces. To kill Murty would bring the whole Pawnee nation down on him. And Murty knew this, and knew his victim would not dare rebel.

"Wouldn't do at all!" Clay whispered. "My hide wouldn't be safe a second after he's wiped out."

However, the notion of Murty's taking-off had found root in his mind and grew sturdily, even if, like a weed, it grew purposelessly.

Then there evolved from his fear and hate another conviction: some time Murty would decide to move on, and when he did he would take all the furs. To avoid any dispute with his partner he would kill him.

"Yes, siree! He opines I'm nothing but a slave. He'll use me; then he'll do for me."

An hour later his last obsession had so depressed him that he decided to break his rule and ride to the village and observe what Murty was up to.

NEARLY three hundred years before, the Pawnee people lured Coronado from New Mexico across the plains to this same country. Could Clay have looked ahead fourteen years, as he rode along the wild trail, he would have seen General Kearney leading his troops along the river path on his way to Santa Fe. And Kearney was to find the region as unsettled and primitive as had the conquistador. The West stood unchanged for centuries, awaiting the white man's roads to shatter the savage fastnesses and pave the way for plow and homestead. Clay would have scorned such a suggestion. He believed the West must continue barbarous and repelling for further centuries; vast and untameable.

He passed well-known bluffs and woods, and grassy intervals thickly dotted with whitening buffalo skulls, only now he was sensing danger where before he had found only monotony and heart-sickness. So long as he had considered Murty a protection against the fickle savages he had splenetically condemned the country, but had not feared. His new angle of vision unraveled all his former assurances of personal safety.

Some cows and their calves, headed by an old bull, crossed his trail to make the river. Several white wolves slunk along behind them. It was a familiar sight, observed hundreds of times before; now it took on a new significance and seemed to picture his own position. He was as helpless as one of the calves did the wolves once get it alone. He jumped from conclusion to conclusion till he convinced himself Murty had planned his death from the beginning of their partnership.

He recalled the man's reticence to discuss former trading ventures; nor could he remember he ever had mentioned a partner. And yet, when in a genial mood, Murty frequently declared that the ideal combination was a man like himself to mix with the Indians and win their good-will, with another, like Joey Clay, to stick at the trading-post and keep the accounts.

"He'll do for me, sure's lightning,"

muttered Clay. "Yes, siree! And he's done for others before I met him. I was a fool not to find out something about him before coming out to this Gawd-forsaken spot. He's probably waiting till the mountain men fetch in their next batch of furs. He'll want me to handle the rush. Then something'll happen to J. Clay. But if something should happen to him first. ——! what's the use? He knows I'm a goner the minute he drops out of the game—that is, unless the Pawnees wipe him out and I have time and luck enough to git away."

But the idea of the Pawnees killing their good friend, Black Buffalo, was too fantastical to entertain. Still the notion bobbed up at times, if only to tantalize his ingenuity by challenging him to imagine some combination of circumstances wherein such a wholesome solution might be possible. The only thing he could think of was a fight between Murty and the chief while drunk. But they had been drunk together many times and had never quarreled.

White Hair's people were Skidi Pawnee, also known as the Wolf Pawnee, and by the French as the Pawnee Loup. They held the inside of the circle against many hostile tribes only by great sacrifice of manpower and by their ability to keep themselves constantly supplied with fresh horses. Thus their means of defense—locomotive power—was also a continuing cause for new wars; and they stole horses from the Black Hills to the great range of the Comanche. Now the immigrants were passing through their country they became especially active in stampeding stocks from the trains.

Clay was shrewd enough to see the Pawnees were playing a losing game and that his partner had done better had he pitched his post among the powerful Dakota. This, also, had been a stock argument between them when Murty stripped to breech-cloth and moccasins, painted for war, joined his red friends in some raid. Murty's contention was very simple: the Pawnees were great fighters, therefore they would hold their own for many years.

"What happens to 'em arter I croak ain't worryin' me any," he would conclude the debate by saying.

Just as a more important personage once remarked he didn't care how heavily it rained after his day closed.

Now that Clay viewed the Pawnees as his potential murderers he took notice of details as he slowly rode into the village. Murty was lounging before White Hair's lodge, watching a procession of priests escorting a comely woman about the village. Clay remained on his horse as the little band approached the chief's lodge. The woman, prompted by the priests, asked for gifts. White Hair listened to her gravely and gave her a small bundle of painted sticks. The woman smiled and thanked him and was led away. Murty discovered his partner, and, without a trace of their morning quarrel, boisterously called out:

"Jest in time f'r th' fun, Joey. Hop down."

Clay dismounted, thrilled by a wild hope that he had misjudged Murty. The man was hopelessly coarse and brutal, but so long as his soul was leavened by an appreciation of the humorous he could not be wholly evil. Murty stared after the priests and the woman and exploded in a loud laugh.

"What's the idea, Murt?" genially asked Clay, his narrow face twisting into a propitiating grin.

"That fool squaw," chuckled Murty. "She's Comanche; caught in a raid 'bout a month ago. She don't know th' medicine smoke warned White Hair to sacrifice to th' Mornin' Star. Mornin' Star's a man, Joey, so they allers sacrifice a woman to him. They don't do it reg'lar. This is th' furst time since we opened th' post. But I've watched 'em do it at other villages afore I met ye. A sure medicine to make th' corn grow, ye know."

The last was said seriously as befitting the expression of a self-evident truth.

"But she laffed," exclaimed Clay incredulously.

"That's th' funny part of it. She don't know what's goin' to happen. She thinks it's all a game," replied Murty. "It has to be done that way, or th' medicine wouldn't be no good. They've treated her better'n her own people did. She likes here better'n she did to home. Today they dress her up an' tell her to ask f'r presents at each lodge. Every lodge gives her some dry wood. She won't guess what's up till they come to sacrifice her an' bury her in th' cornfields."

"Good heavens! They'll kill her!" gasped Clay.

"None o' that," ominously warned Murty from the corner of his mouth. "Want to make th' chief here thinkin' ye're ag'in his medicine? They've got to have corn, ain't they?"

"But burying a dead woman won't make corn grow," expostulated Clay, his soul sick and quivering.

"Th' devil it won't!" growled Murty, his brows growing black. "Think all th' real medicine is made east o' th' Mississippi? This village can't go north arter buf'ler till th' Dakotas git over that last raid on th' Republican. If they raise a big crop o' corn they can trade it with some o' th' other tribes f'r meat. This medicine is extry sure. I know what I'm talkin' 'bout."

"You can stay and watch the devil's work, but I'm going back to the post," muttered Clay, the sweat now trickling down his thin face. And he mounted his horse hurriedly, to be off before the terrible ceremony began. He paused only to say—

"Tell White Hair I'll give him two kegs of whisky for the woman."

"An' git knifed f'r meddlin' with his medicine," snorted Murty. "Nothin' but a regiment o' soljers could stop it. I sha'n't be home f'r a few days. Keep a close watch f'r Dakota scouts."

Clay rode like a mad man till far beyond the village. He had heard stories of the Skidi sacrifice to the morning and evening stars but had accepted them as legends, just as he did the stories about the Nahurac lodges, and children brought up by bears. The village, never a prepossessing spot in his estimation, now became a foul murder trap. What would they not do with him should Murty give the word!

FIVE days passed before Murty returned to the post. Clay greeted him warmly but studied him stealthily. Murty was unusually boisterous in his bearing, and yet he had not been drinking. He was effusively cordial. Clay quickly decided this exaggerated joviality was a mask. Every now and then he betrayed himself by quick, sidelong glances. Each man was stalking the other, only Murty was clumsy at it.

Clay shivered as his partner began following him about, always keeping behind him. Then, without knowing why he should reshape his suspicions, Clay concluded his partner was acting thus in order to cover up something. Murty talked garrulously about his absence and took pains to dwell on the fact he had been at the Pawnee village all the time.

Hoping to induce him to betray himself in some way Clay took the water pails and went toward the river. Once inside the narrow, leafy tunnel he halted and watched till Murty furtively appeared in the doorway and, after a searching scrutiny of the woods, hastened to the ash growth back of the post.

Dropping the pails Clay swiftly circled back and came upon his partner so unexpectedly that only the latter's abstraction prevented a discovery. Murty was kneeling at the foot of a big boulder and fumbling with moss and dry grass. Finally he rose, his fierce eyes ranging the surrounding cover suspiciously for a moment. Then he ran swiftly toward the post. Clay knew his life hung in the balance should Murty continue on to the river and find the abandoned pails, but there was no resisting the shivery curiosity alternately freezing and burning his blood. He crawled to the rock and thrust his arm and hand into a deep cleft.

He pulled forth a cross made of gold beads, several finger-rings of gold and a handful of gold coins. There were more coins in the hole, a small mound of them. Something like a galvanic shock jolted him; the treasure trove was crushing him with hideous suggestions.

Restoring the stuff and carefully replacing the moss and grass he scuttled like a frightened shadow back to the river path. Breathless with fear he came to the pails. Was Murty behind him at the post, unsuspicious of his spying, or had he entered the path and found the pails? As Clay sped on down to the river bank he had no idea whether he was hastening to his death, or was safe for the time being.

He reached the bank and hurriedly filled the pails, expecting every moment to behold Murty's sardonic visage leering at him from the undergrowth. Nothing happened, and he threw himself on the bank and made sure the horse-pistol in his belt slipped easily. By degrees his heart quieted and his breathing became normal.

"Guess he's been trading with the Pawnee on the sly for that gold. He's holding out on me."

There was a ray of hope in this reasoning, for if Murty purposed killing him he would scarcely bother to conceal any assets. The thought was vastly comforting till he remembered that Murty had withdrawn no goods from the post. It was Clay who kept the accounts and who was in position to abstract goods and trade on his own account. Murty had no more finesse in such matters than a gorilla.

"If he got the stuff from the Injuns he ain't paid for it yet," he concluded.

"O-e-e! Jo-ey!" loudly called Murty, and Clay's legs twitched convulsively.

"All right! Here I be!" Clay bawled back, assuming a lazy attitude with his right hand resting on his right hip.

Murty clumped down the path, whistling imitations of bird calls.

"Ye ain't been alone 'nough yet but what ye want to sneak off an' leave yer old pard," he chided with what was intended for an amiable grin.

"Been watching something across in the bushes," grunted Clay, pointing his pistol toward the opposite shore. "Reckon it's a ant'lope."

"Ye'd never land him with that," said Murty. "I don't see no signs."

"Right straight across. Tops of the bushes moved. Mebbe it's gone now," and he rose, still toying with the pistol.

Murty stooped and picked up the two pails, his head passing close to Clay's face. There was red paint back of his ears and at the roots of his long black hair. Clay's heart skipped several beats.

"What did you do after I quit the village?" he carelessly inquired.

Murty darted him a suspicious glance and carelessly replied:

"Jest took it lazy an' chinned with White Ha'r. He wants me to go on a buf'ler hunt. Reckons I'd be big medicine ag'in th' Dakota."

Clay hesitated, then forced himself to ask—

"The Comanche woman?"

"Sure. They got to have corn."

Clay shuddered and shifted his thoughts to the gold cross under the boulder. Murty lied when he said he had been at the village. The paint and the unusual loot proved he had been on a raid. No Indian possessed such trinkets unless he had massacred whites. An awful loathing of the swart-visaged man filled the little New Englander's soul. Something horrible had been enacted, and the coins and the cross testified to Murty's complicity. How easy it would be to eliminate the man from all further consideration by the simple process of raising his pistol and pulling the trigger! A child could do it.

"Don't wave that gun so keerless-like, Joey. Ye make me nervous," remonstrated Murty.

Clay colored and thrust the pistol into his belt. Murty was dull of wit but he had absorbed enough from the savages to be abnormally intuitive.

To cover his confusion he faced the opposite bank and regretted—

"Wish I had my rifle and a ant'lope would pop into sight."

He had scarcely spoken when the bushes across the river swayed violently; but instead of an antelope the figure of a man staggered down the bank and raised both hands in supplication.

"——!" yelled Murty, dropping the pails and snatching the pistol from his belt.

"He's white!" yelled Clay, knocking up the weapon as it exploded. "Derned fool! Can't you see it's a white man, all tuckered out?"

For a moment Murty glared murder at his partner, then hoarsely conceded:

"Derned if it ain't! Thought it was a Dakota scout."

Clay passed over the clumsy excuse. The tattered figure would not deceive even a greenhorn into thinking it an Indian. At the sound of the shot the man fell to his knees. Clay waved his hand and yelled:

"Hi! come across. Water's shallow a few rods up-stream. Thought you was a hostile."

The man lurched to his feet and made for the ford. Murty watched him with wolfish eyes, his lips drawing back and disclosing long teeth, much as a beast of prey views the approach of a victim. And Clay watched Murty.

The newcomer was barely able to crawl up the bank He was dressed in tatters and tags of homespun and had lost his boots. A scrubby growth of sandy beard accentuated rather than concealed the frozen expression of terror on his long snuff-colored face.

"Save me!" he groaned, and Clay caught

his arm and prevented him from falling back into the river.

"Save ye from what? Who be ye? Where ye from?" questioned Murty.

"Wagon train jumped. Dog Crick. All kilt," wailed the stranger. "My name's Bowls."

"Seems ye wa'n't kilt," growled Murty. "When was ye jumped? How'd ye git away?"

"Two nights ago. I was out arter a stray hoss. Injuns at work when I come back. I kept low in th' grass. Gawdfrey! Such doin's!"

"Well, well, you ain't hurt yet and you're safe now," soothed Clay, the horripilation of his scalp subsiding only when he remembered his pistol was loaded while Murty's was empty. If the wretched creature before him had displayed any fortitude he would have believed him sent by Providence to be a companion down the Arkansas. He had an insane desire to ask if any women in the train wore beads in the form of a cross.

"You ain't hurt and Murty, here, my partner, is worth a whole tribe of Injuns."

Murty worked his face into a less ferocious expression and declared:

"Bet ye was jumped by Dakota. No Southern Injuns up this way, an' th' Pawnees ain't stirred from their village f'r a long time. Yas, Joey, it's Dakota work, all right. That means I've got to hustle to White Ha'r's village an' warn him th' Dakotas have come. Sit tight at th' post an' keep yer eye peeled. I'll be back tonight, or tomorrer."

"I could hear 'em swearin' an' screamin', th' men'n' women," mumbled Bowls as Murty disappeared up the path.

"Many women folks in th' outfit?" whispered Clay.

"Th' wagon-boss' woman an' th' wives o' five Missouri men. I'm from Ohio. Thank th' Lawd there wa'n't no children."

"Did they take the women prisoners?" shivered Clay.

"Not so bad as that," returned Bowls, pumping up each word with great difficulty. A bit of a pause and he ran on. "Th' Injuns passed near me. Me flat in th' grass. Some of 'em had ripped burnin' cloth from th' wagons, an' they kept wavin' it as they rode. One o' th' Injuns talked in English."

Clay seized him by the shoulders and shook him till his head rocked.

"Never repeat that. If you want to keep on living never, while on the Arkansas, let on you was near enough to *see* the Injuns. You heard firing and ran for it. And that's all. Understand?"

"I reckon," muttered Bowls. "But one of 'em I'd know ag'in if I ever seen him. Passed within twelve feet o' me, wavin' a parcel o' burnin' cloth. Had a queer, twisted face, and his scalp-lock had a streak o' white paint through it."

Clay caught his arm and stole a frightened glance up the narrow path, and softly asked:

"The Injun who talked English? Would you know him again?"

"No; I couldn't tell him ag'in. Face jest plastered over with red paint and he wore a hanker 'round his head. He rode side o' th' Injun with th' streaked hair."

Clay drew a deep breath and warned:

"Listen; I'm your friend. Don't never speak of it to my partner. He gits excited easy. Remember."

With that he took the pails and refilled them and led the way to the post. Murty had gone. Without a word Clay took down a rifle and loaded it and put on a percussion cap and thrust it into Bowls' hands. Next he thrust a pistol and knife into the rope that served the immigrant for a belt. Then he looked after his own rifle and added a knife and second pistol to his own belt.

"Now we're ready to eat a snack. You look kind of peaked," he said.

THE religious ceremonies of the Pawnees reflected their veneration of cosmic forces and their worship of the heavenly bodies. Tirawa, "father," held all power and executed his will through the phenomena of lightning and thunder, wind and rain. The universe was dual, masculine and feminine.

Now the priests were declaring the stars continued maleficent despite the recent sacrifice of the Comanche woman. White Hair heard them with surprise, for was not the village much richer from the raid on the immigrant train?

"The Dakotas are coming," explained the priest.

"O-pit-i-kut has had a woman sacrificed," protested White Hair.

"The Morning Star is satisfied, but the

Evening Star has had no sacrifice," replied the priest.

"A man shall be sacrificed to her," said White Hair.

"Red flesh will not please. The flesh must be white," warned the priest.

"White Hair will bring white flesh," was the laconic assurance.

The chief spoke confidently, yet he was worried. The Dakotas traveled fast. His young men had been reporting their progress ever since sunrise. The sacrifice must be made at once if the impending evil was to be avoided. He lamented his negligence in not taking some of the immigrants alive. He had wished to do so, but his friend insisted there should be no prisoners. And it might be several moons before another train could be surprised and captured.

The priest guessed his perturbation, and reminded—

"There is white flesh near; the little trader who lives with the Black Buffalo."

"I will tell Black Buffalo when he comes. He grows tired of the little trader."

"Our medicine says we must sacrifice before the sun sleeps a second time," warned the priest. "Send after the little trader."

White Hair sprang to a horse, saying:

"The victim must not know he is to be sacrificed till brought to the painted cross. I will go to the Black Buffalo and bring him and the little trader back with me. I will ride outside of the trail and meet any of our scouts who have seen the Dakotas since the first runners came in."

Because of his slight detour toward the open prairie White Hair missed meeting Murty on the river trail, and arrived at the trading-post shortly after his friend set out for the village. Bowls was first to see the Indian approaching, and with a squeal of terror crawled behind some buffalo robes. Clay advanced to the door to greet the chief.

Leaping from his horse White Hair strode to the door and pushing Clay aside entered, expecting to find Murty at the bottle or asleep.

"Where is the Black Buffalo?" he demanded, his sharp gaze noting the two rifles and the weapons in Clay's belt.

"On his way to Little Pawnee Village," growled Clay, his pale eyes lighting venomously at the overbearing demeanor of the chief.

White Hair reached behind the short counter and found Murty's bottle and drained it. Clay was consumed with rage. This liberty violated all ethics of trade.

"Waugh!" grunted White Hair, smacking his lips. "Black Buffalo's friend will go to the village now. Black Buffalo wants him."

"You scum! You just showed you don't know where Black Buffalo is!" cried Clay in English. Then in the chief's tongue: "If Black Buffalo wants me he will come for me, or send a talking paper."

The rank liquor registered quickly on the Indian, and maniacal lights shone in his black eyes. A white man must be sacrificed to the Evening Star. The Evening Star was jealous, and the Dakota were advancing. Were there no other white man available the chief would have sentenced Black Buffalo himself.

"Come!" he ordered, and his crest of black and gray hair seemed to bristle. "The medicine pipe has passed from left to right. Black Buffalo says for you to come."

"You have not seen Black Buffalo. I stay here," boldly replied Clay.

With a guttural growl of rage White Hair seized him about the waist and was carrying him to the door when a terrified sallow visage emerged from behind the robes, and a scrawny arm, shaking spasmodically, sought to aim a long-barreled pistol. Clay, held helpless and glaring over the chief's shoulder, yelled:

"Git it closer! Git nearer!"

With a puppy whine of fear Bowls crawled to his feet. White Hair caught the alarm and, dropping his captive, spun about.

"Th' Injun I seen!" shrieked Bowls, and he closed his eyes and fired just as the chief leaped upon him.

Both crashed to the earthen floor. Clay pulled his rescuer from the savage and stood him on his feet. Bowls still retained the smoking pistol and stared from it to the silent figure sprawled out at his feet.

"You done for him!" panted Clay, hardly able to comprehend the miracle.

Bowls dropped the weapon and whimpered:

"Th' Injun with th' painted hair. Is he dead?"

Clay by this time began to realize their predicament. With a snarl of fear he jumped to the door and glared up and down the trail. There was no one in sight. Turning to the stupefied immigrant he commanded:

"Help me git him outer here. Oh, Lawd! What won't they do to us if they find him!"

"I knew him when I seen his hair," shivered Bowls. "Reckon I killed him."

"Catch hold of his heels, you fool! He can't hurt you."

It seemed as if they never would cross the narrow opening and gain the shelter of the woods. Only by fearful imprecations could Clay hold Bowls to the grim task till they reached the river bank. Directing him to procure some stones for weights Clay crouched beside the dead chief and tried to think. As his mind cleared he could foresee the wild excitement and mad search for the chief. Four years on the Arkansas had taught the trader many things; he knew the Pawnees would quickly trace their leader to the post and at once read the signs on the floor and along the river path.

"They must have known he was coming here," he muttered, essaying to make a summary of all the evidence. "He come to see Murty, so he must'a'passed him on the way. The village don't know but what they met. Murty wants to be shet of me and the chief was going to take me to the village. Said the pipe had passed from left to right. They've made new medicine and I figgered in it some way. By the Lawd Harry! They'll soon have a white scalp for this streaked one! Murty's or mine. But the village don't know him and Murty didn't meet. If they thought the two met——"

He was still nursing his inspiration when Bowls staggered up with an armful of rocks.

"Gimme that rope 'round your waist," Clay ordered. "Then go up the path and watch if any one comes to the post. Don't show yourself. My partner'll be back soon. I've got a plan, but it depends on whether he comes alone or not. If Injuns come with him we must both hide. If he comes alone I'll see him. But you stay hid. Git!"

After Bowls departed Clay sat for some moments, testing the edge of his knife with his thumb and working himself up to perform a very disagreeable task.

MURTY arrived at the village just as the priests and leading men began another medicine smoke. A young buck informed him that White Hair had gone to the trading-post. Without dismounting the trader galloped down the trail. He could not understand why he had not met the chief. An animal instinct was telling him something was radically wrong. It was imperative that he find the chief and arrange for a band of his braves to swoop down and capture the immigrant and Clay. At first he had thought to wait and spare Clay till after the Fall season closed. But he fancied his partner was growing suspicious. A clean sweep was best.

Leaping from his horse he ran to the post, calling the chief's name. Clay met him at the door, inquiring—

"What you yelling about?"

"White Hair? Where is he?"

"Come and went. Stirred up about something. Drank half a bottle of your whisky and then reckoned he'd take a package of presents back to his squaw. said something about you *gitting more'n your share.*"

Murty flushed beneath his heavy tan and barked—

"The fool's drunk."

"Of course. Turned down most a quart. I wouldn't let him have any presents till you said so. Thought first he was going to knife me, but he cleared out, a-yelling how the devil'd be to pay if his squaw didn't git them presents in a rush. Mebbe I oughter give them to him. Most wish I had after he quit." And Clay pointed to a package of trade gee-gaws and squaw's finery on the counter. "Fixed them up after he went hellytowhooping. According to his say the Dakotas will be here soon and I guess we'll need his help, or else take to the timber."

Murty swore fiercely. He was worried about the Dakotas. To run for it meant the loss of four years' profits and the forfeit of the Pawnees' friendship. What with the danger of the Dakotas and his own private homicide plans he was rather uncertain just what to do.

"I've done nothing but miss the fool!" he raved. "He's got to be found at once. He's got to lead his men ag'in th' Dakotas an' hit 'em hard afore they strike th' Arkansas, or we'll all be wiped out. You did right, Joey, in not letting him have the goods. He mustn't git the notion he can come an' help himself. But we'll take them up to him. Ye'll be safer at the village till we know how the game is goin' with th' Dakota. Git yer hoss."

"If you think best," meekly assented Clay, passing over the parcel of gifts. "But we'll be leaving Bowls."

"Ain't he 'round here?" cried Murty. "He's too white-livered to go far. No; we didn't oughter leave him behind. Give him a hoot."

Clay rushed out and yelled the immigrant's name repeatedly.

"No use," he puffed. "Wait for me and I'll ride down the trail a piece. Don't leave me alone."

This was a masterstroke. For Murty, wild with impatience to find the chief and perfect a fighting unit to surprise the Dakota, was no longer doubtful as to Clay's eagerness to seek safety at the village.

"Find th' pup an' foller me, Joey," he directed. "I'll send some o' th' young bucks down to meet ye. Ye won't be in no danger. But I must put a fightin' heart into White Ha'r without a minute lost, or our goose is cooked. Swing a leg over yer hoss an' th' minute ye find him come a humpin'."

"Why can't you wait a bit?" Clay began to expostulate, but now sure of his man Murty swung into the saddle and raced away.

MURTY smiled grimly as he cantered along. The disappearance of his partner had been a matter rather difficult for him to arrange to his satisfaction. It had been less easy than the proposed victim had supposed. Questions would be asked when he returned to the frontier without him. There were several old mountain men who were still curious to learn just how another partner of his up in the Medicine Bow Mountains had died. Now, with the killing blamed on the hostile Dakota the finale would be as simple as it was agreeable.

"Cussed if it ain't playin' right into my hands," he exulted. "No matter whether th' Pawnees win or lose I'll jump this place with what furs I can take, an' cache th' rest. Then I can look up a new partner an' move down Green River way, where no questions will be asked."

He entered the village and drew rein before White Hair's lodge. Tossing his package of presents to the chief's young squaw, he raised his bull-like voice in a demand for the chief to appear. Priests and warriors crowded thick about him and he was astounded to learn White Hair had not returned.

"He went to Black Buffalo's lodge. Black Buffalo must have seen him there," said a priest.

"He had been there. He was gone when I went back the second time. I missed him going and coming," replied the puzzled trader.

"He went to get the little trader. The Evening Star is angry with her children, the Skidi."

Wild suspicions shot through Murty's mind. Clay had said nothing about any invitation from the chief to come to the village.

"Send some of your warriors to bring the little trader here. He was to follow after me with another white man who escaped from the immigrant train. Bring them both and let the Evening Star be fed. Then find the chief——"

A staccato shriek at his feet caused him to jump and lurch half out the saddle. What he saw bereft him of reason for a moment, and he could only glare with his mouth open and his eyes bulging. The squaw had opened the pack and was now holding up a gay handkerchief to which was pinned a fresh scalp. The streak of grayish-black identified it beyond all question. It was the focal point for every pair of savage eyes in the savage circle.

"Gawdamighty! White Ha'r's top-knot! Clay done f'r him an' put his ha'r in the bundle to do f'r me," babbled the dazed plotter.

"The Black Buffalo sells us to the Dakotas!" shouted the priest.

"SOMETHIN' comin'. Ain't Injuns," barked the night guard of the trappers' camp on the Smoky.

They were employees of the American Fur Company and were making for St. Louis, the rival of Montreal as an outfitting center.

"White man's voice," decided one of the trappers, as the faint cry was repeated.

"Mebbe a game to git us off our guard," grunted another as he rolled aside and nursed his rifle. "Injuns thicker'n wild mustard."

They listened a moment, then the cry came again from the darkness, sounding near at hand, but very weak.

"Help—friends."

"Yeh. Friends to honest men. Come into th' light," ordered the guard, dropping on one knee.

Two men stumbled into the firelight, and one glance at their despairing, haggard faces told the mountain men they were no renegade whites acting as decoys. They were made comfortable by the fire and provided with food. They ate ravenously, Bowls falling asleep with a buffalo rib half raised to his mouth.

Clay produced a pipe and after tobacco had been given him he wearily explained:

"Me'n' that feller have been running from Injuns more'n a month. Lost track of time. He swears it's two months, but he's been loony at times. We was following the Arkansas and was chased away from it by some Pawnees. We got clear of them, but didn't dare beat back to the river. Then our powder give out. Then our hosses stampeded one night. We threw away our rifles and went it afoot. We didn't dare travel much in the daytime during the last two weeks as the country seemed full of Injuns making for the Arkansas. Guess if we hadn't hit your camp we'd'a' cashed in. Dead tired. Talk more tomorrer."

"Th' Injuns ye see was Dakota tryin' to round up Little Pawnee Village," informed the guard. "They tried it four weeks ago an' got a awful drubbin'. Seems ol' White Ha'r's people fed a white man to one o' their star gods th' night afore th' battle, an' their medicine was so strong they licked 'bout five times their number. What Dakotas escaped hustled back home, an' now they've come back with some eight hundred. Yeh; Arkansas is a good river to keep shet of till th' trouble's over atween th' two tribes."

The firelight struck sparks from Clay's pale eyes. Half-rising from the buffalo robe he faintly murmured:

"White man, eh? Happen to hear his name?"

"Yeh; an' it didn't bring any sorrer," growled the trapper. "Skunk had a post down th' river. Kilt his partner an' murdered ol' White Ha'r, th' Pawnee chief. Name was Murty. One of our men happened along th' day follerin' th' fight an' l'arned all 'bout it. Better go to sleep."

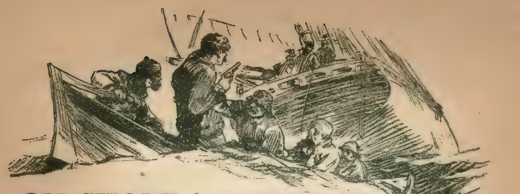
"Yes; I can sleep fine now," mumbled Clay.

THE ROUGHNECK

by BERTON BRALEY

MAIDEN aunts, both male and female, like him not;
He offends their sensibilities too much,
And he's always sure to get himself in Dutch
With the genteel, ultra-cultured, bloodless lot.
He is always knocking platitudes to pot,
While he crushes old traditions in his clutch;
He's a sort of bomb exploding at a touch,
Or volcano, spouting lava, fierce and hot.

He is shaggy, craggy, heavy-shouldered, crude;
He is oftentimes unconscionably wrong,
But—he fights the unctuous, pussy-footed brood
And his voice is that of progress, youthful, strong.
You may scorn him, flay him, hound him and suppress him
But he'll go his way in spite of you, God bless him!



ON SHORT ALLOWANCE

by E. S. Pladwell

Author of "No Brains."

THE job was thrown at big Captain John Riley in the first place—tossed like a bone to a dog by a fat-jowled, pig-eyed shipowner with the manners of a wart-hog and the soul of a shark, who prided himself on being direct and businesslike.

"You piled up a good tramp steamer and you've been stranded ever since," pointed Peter F. Slemm, the shipowner. "You're in bad with the underwriters. You'll take any job you can get. That's why I hired you and paid you beforehand. You'll work cheap."

Humiliated to his toes but desperate for work, the other bowed his elderly head and spoke in soft, measured words that trembled queerly.

"That is thrue," he admitted, with the suspicion of a brogue. "I've a sick wife."

"Correct," agreed Slemm, rolling a luscious cigar between thick lips. "Now, then. You'll get a cheap crew and cheap grub, and just enough to get to Vladivostok at that. The ship ain't much—she's forty years old, dug out of the boneyard and fixed up as a three-masted schooner—but she came cheap. That's the main thing.

"This is a business venture, you see; strictly business," Slemm condescended to explain further. "If you get across I'll make something and maybe you'll get another chance. If she blows up on the way—I'm speakin' frank—it'll cost as little as possible. The cargo of explosives is consigned to the Export Transportation Department of the Roosian Government. I'll fix the business end. You'll only have to work the ship. That's all, I guess."

"All right," murmured Riley, huskily, as his big fists clenched, "I'll take the chance."

Slemm did not offer to shake hands and Riley was glad of it, for the trim, gray-eyed, mustached mariner with the ramrod spine longed to choke the cold-eyed owner and scatter his fat carcass about the room. Only the subsequent unemployment deterred him—and he had tramped the streets till his heart was sick within him.

"Oh, a jewel of an owner!" Riley muttered bitterly as he strode toward the San Francisco waterfront. "A grand, fine shpecimen of a cold-blooded swine! And me once captain of a ten-thousand-ton freighter! Oh, well—mebbe I'll meet friends on the east coast. It's a gambler's chance, but I'm a gambler. I have to be!"

Had the sailor known how an ironic fate was shuffling cards against him he might not have gambled at all, desperate as he was; but like other humans he could not peer into the future. Thus he found himself a week later on the poop of a big three-masted "fore and after" as she pointed toward the horizon of the Pacific and rolled her soggy old nose into the white-capped seas, leaving the sentinel Golden Gate behind her.

The ship gave Riley's sailor-heart a twinge when first he set foot on her, for cheap she was. The hull was the worst of the old hulks resurrected from Oakland estuary, the graveyard of the Pacific. The canvas, rigging and sticks were patchwork, collected from everywhere. The interior furnishings were meager and old. There were no topsails. Topsails cost money. Only the cargo was valuable and that consisted of dynamite and gunpowder, packed in waterproof cases and kegs in the hold till the old ship staggered under its lethal load.

Somehow Riley collected a crew. Good men were afloat in better ships and to get a total of ten souls aboard the desperate master had to take anything that walked, trusting to make the riffraff into sailors later. His last recruit was his prize. It came on a wharf where he was cursing his schooner and whined for a job at sea.

"Gimme a chance," pleaded the cringing derelict. "Jest a show to git away from waterfront booze. I won't be in the way—Gimme a chance!"

Clad in a sweaty gingham shirt and faded blue overalls, the man was short, stocky, snub-nosed, blear-eyed and red-faced, a veteran alcoholic showing long allegiance to John Barleycorn. He looked too worthless even for that ship, but he persisted.

Waking to semi-consciousness in a quiet gutter an hour before he had reviewed his past life hazily, felt deeply and sentimentally regretful, and resolved on a last effort to put himself out of temptation. Thus he sought the sea, where liquor is not supposed to be.

When dynamite was mentioned the man ignored it—or never heard it—and still persisted. The framework of his body seemed fairly sound and his eyes held a blurred sort of intelligence, so Riley signed him on and hoped for the best. The man called himself "Whisky" Bill, and was shunted into the forecastle, into the company of men scarce better than he.

Before this Riley had signed on a tall, dark-haired, silent nondescript with the sky-blue eyes found in visionaries, conquerors and fanatics, and a part of a little finger gone. He acquired the name of "Big Frank." The man's face and bearing seemed dull and listless, even mournful; but Riley began to note otherwise on the second day out, when it was brought home to him forcibly.

"The crew kicks about the grub already," warned First Mate Blazon, a swarthy, lazy product of the Florida Keys. "Watch that Big Frank. He leads them."

"On the shtart of the voyage, eh? Then we'll have to shtop it," said Riley, quietly. "I'll admit the grub's dog-rotten but I'll shtand no slack from that crowd. I don't dare. They don't know their work. Ye gods, what a crew!" And the master shook anguished fists in the air.

Later, in his bare cabin, Riley thought things over. He pitied these men and had planned to be an easy master. He was born to be friends with humankind, but now he resolved to exact the strictest kind of discipline. The food was enough to make any crew restive. There must be no slack master on top of that.

Furthermore, the ship might be filthy but Riley would not be. He understood the influence of a spruce, clean-looking officer, so the vessel saw him thereafter in his old natty master's uniform with only the insignia of his former line taken off. On that slattern schooner the trim merchant-marine skipper seemed incongruous, but he had himself to please.

Riley had no doubts about the loyalty of the easy-going Blazon or his second-mate, a Swede named Larsen, but he saw they had to toe the mark also, otherwise the master would have to impose his discipline single-handed. He resolved to give them an object lesson at the first opportunity, and thus on the fifth day, when a scowling Greek at the mainmast obeyed the first mate's orders sluggishly, Riley was prepared. He leaped off the poop and grabbed the man by the back of the neck while noting that two other members of the crew were watching.

"What d'ye mean by that?" he bawled. "When you get an ordher you'll jump!" And he shook the other till his teeth chattered. "Now," continued the wrathful master, "you'll have a little dhrill. You see that cordage coiled along the deck? You'll coil and uncoil it for one hour. If you loaf one minute you'll get two hours more. Now shtart!"

From the corner of his eye Riley noted a giant form loafing almost behind him and whirled about suddenly. It was Big Frank.

"Well?" snapped the master, stiffening.

The other looked embarrassed and Riley pointed toward the forecastle.

"Go forward, you!" he roared.

The other hesitated a fraction of a second but at the first twitch of the peppery master's muscles he shuffled toward the forecastle and Riley mounted the poop again. The mate had quietly taken in the scene and smiled at him, but Riley was not in that mood.

"Mishter Blazong," said the master, pointedly, "the next time you're not obeyed inshtantly, take action!"

"I was goin' to start," protested the mate, "but you went too fast."

"Don't let any one beat you!" snapped Riley. "We've got to choke off throuble before it shtarts, with this crowd. If there was a man among 'em I'd praise the saints, but they're too cheap! That Big Frank is the only one with muscles and if he shtarts anything, get him quick. Them's ordhers!"

Without further words Riley went to his dingy cabin, thinking of the sordid owner who sent this foul old hulk to sea without pity for those aboard and wishing he had choked the fat scoundrel when he had the chance. Sitting down to his tasteless meal of suspicious canned beef and ancient potatoes and brackish bread, Riley longed for the choking still more. Back in his consciousness he wondered what he would do after he turned his cargo over to the Russians. Another trip on a Slemm ship was unthinkable.

BUT the next four weeks went by quietly, with the crew sullen but outwardly falling in with Riley's taut discipline and the old dynamite-schooner slatting and groaning westward and northward across the seas, rolling the miles behind her. Then came a storm. Mistrusting his ship, Riley stood by his helmsman and was drenched and battered for hours by whipping spindrift while snarling seas leaped over the low bulwarks and swept the deck a hundred times. When the storm subsided forty hours after it started and the wind swung from the north in a steady blow, the tired master turned into his bunk and let the big, regular waves rock him to sleep.

Riley awoke suddenly in his dark bunk. A yell and the sounds of rushing feet on the deck apprized him that something was amiss. Jumping out of his bunk and donning trousers, Riley sensed it was early morning—before dawn.

The agitated clatter of feet outside increased. Voices shouted frantically. On the poop above Riley something heavy was being hauled along the deck to port. It sounded like a boat being swung from her davits. A sharp voice boomed from above, then footsteps thundered down the cabin companionway while the half-clad Riley grabbed a pistol from a holster and waited till a near-by voice howled to him.

"Jump for your life!" shrieked the voice. It belonged to Blazon, the mate. "The ship is afire forward!"

The man's sea-boots clattered upward again desperately.

Riley's heart clutched and his hair tingled at the instant of imagination that pictured what would happen when the first spark struck that cargo. Panic seized him, but only for a moment. The next instant he rushed to the deck, pistol in hand.

Forward, a tiny glare showed through the glass of the closed hatch above the forecastle—a sinister flicker of light just bright enough to throw the panting, shrieking men into shadow as they surged about the poop and labored madly to cast overside the bulky small boat. The mate was directing savagely with fists and curses. The quivering second mate was working at the stubborn falls. The prow of the small boat was swung outward, almost meeting the heavy seas that leaped toward the deck, and near that prow spoke a whimpering voice, chattering with terror and repeating its phrase automatically—

"He turned the lamp over—he turned the lamp over!"

Riley's eye took in the scene in an instant. He glanced toward the wheel, where the helmsman had left to join in the general panic. Then Riley glanced forward. The yellow-red light seemed a little larger. And dynamite only a few inches away!

The cool dawn-wind was soughing through the rigging, laying the ship far over to port and whistling about the hatch above the forecastle where only a flimsy floor stood between the flames and the cargo. Above, the stars were beginning to pale. Far to the north but within easy small-boat distance stretched the many islands of the Aleutian group, like stepping-stones from Alaska to the Orient. Alongside the old schooner the sea was running high and the vessel was quartering the giant waves and just beginning to broach as it felt the lack of the helmsman's hands.

In the flash that the practised eye of Riley noted all these things his mind was made up. He raised the pistol and strode toward the mob, firing into the air. The report half-paralyzed some of them.

"Off from that boat!" roared Riley. "Get away!"

For an instant the men hesitated and the master leveled the pistol toward the mass.

"Go forward, somebody!" he roared. "Get forward and open that hatch—quick!"

The man near the small boat's prow backed away from it and seemed undecided; but another man claimed the master's attention.

"No!" shrieked Larsen, the cowering second mate. "Are you mad? It iss murder! No!"

In the faint glow of the dawn the man's face was grimacing and his voice whinnied with fear; but Riley could not hesitate. He knew that each second a spark was nearing the slumbering inferno in the hold.

"Go forward!" he thundered, and a gust of wind took the full force of his voice into the crowd. "Go forward, some of you, quick—before I kill you all!"

Instantly Larsen jumped backward and overboard. Equally quick, the desperate master fired, but the bullet missed its mark. Then Big Frank started frantically to ward off the master, but Riley ignored him. Something else had happened.

In that maddening second a chunky figure had rushed away from the small boat's prow and off the poop, while Riley sprang to the wheel. The figure dashed wildly across the deck. One leap and the man was up the forward steps. Another brought him to the forecastle hatch. A quick tug and it came off, and the heavy north wind sucked down the open hole and blew tiny sparks and wisps of smoke upward and outward.

"Good work, Whisky Bill—climb the rigging!" shrieked Riley, as he twisted the spokes of the wheel like a madman, and the other understood somehow and went up the shrouds like a panic-stricken monkey, while Riley swung the heavy ship around.

Ignoring the maniacs by the small boat, with his heart in his mouth, wondering if his next moment would be in eternity, Riley pointed his ship straight into the wind. With the lift of a giant wave the bow arose till the deck tilted high and the old schooner groaned with the extra strain. Then the big wave swirled under the stern and the bow lowered till Riley felt as if on top of a steep hill. The next comber loomed in front of him like a dark, high wall.

"Hold on every one!" roared the master. "Hold, for your lives!"

The bowsprit dived straight into the foaming, seething wall of water that crashed onward till it struck the edge of the hatchway. Then vats and firkins and tons of brine swept into the hold and the lethal light snuffed out.

The big wave swirled aft in foaming frenzy. It slapped the mainmast with mighty force. It struck the break of the poop and climbed up, up, till the feet and knees and thighs of the master were under cold water and he held to the wheel frantically while the slavering mass of brine and foam tried to suck him away from it. The small boat disappeared unseen. Then gradually the heavy mass of water grew lower about the skipper's legs and the awful pressure lessened. The ship's bow and stern came up heavily and then the old craft groaned and slumped down—waterlogged.

"That," breathed the half-naked Riley, as he began to swing the logy ship to port and let the wind again catch the slatting sails, "that is the way to put out a fire!"

FIVE days and nights the pumps were working till the porous-hided old tub slowly came up out of the water. Three men were gone—vanished with the small boat or overboard—but Riley made up for that by peeling off his natty brass-buttoned coat and pitching in himself, setting an example to the hard-driven crew. The skipper watched that crew closely, ready for the first hostile move. But there was none. Perhaps his set face forestalled it as he thought over his situation, thankful only that the cargo was waterproof and hardly damaged. He said little but worked and waited until the ship was right again.

On the sixth day all hands rested, and on the next, refreshed and invigorated, blessed by a fresh wind that shoved the old craft joyously along, Riley went on deck prepared to thresh out certain questions. Relieving the mate he ordered both watches on deck and soon they grouped under the poop, looking curious or embarrassed, as the case might be. Then, with only five of his former crew before him and with the mate sleeping below, the skipper began his formal court martial.

"You," he began, pointing a forefinger

at Whisky Bill. "You said 'he tipped the lamp over.' Who did?"

Weak and wobbly from his alcohol-cure and his recent labor, Bill was taken aback. Blank-faced, he tried to think while his eyes swung toward the threatening face of Big Frank, and then away. Riley noticed the glance while Bill sparred for time.

"Who? Me?" he asked, scratching his head.

"You," said the master, grimly.

"Did—did I say that?"

"You did," replied Riley, his temper rising. "Tell me who tipped that lamp!" he thundered. "Was it this man, Frank? quick, now—shpeak up!"

"M-mebbe," said Bill, nervously. "I dunno. I didn't see him."

"And a foc'sle lamp hangin' on heavy chains was tipped over accidental," said Riley, sarcastically. "Let's see who filed the chains. You, Frank, shtep forward!"

There was a ring of something dangerous in the Irish captain's voice and the sullen sailor felt impelled to step forward while Riley half-descended the steps and smiled at him peculiarly.

"And why didn't ye jump into the small boat with the others when the big wave hit us?" asked Riley, softly. "The boat was provisioned for a long cruise, wasn't it? That was part of the big idea, wasn't it? You'd tip over the lamp and then every one would have a fine excuse to jump into the shmall boat and ride to the Aleutians. Them that wasn't in on the plan would be frightened enough to go into the boat anyhow. It was a fine, genteel, beautiful idea—but why didn't ye go into the boat? Did ye fear there'd be a hitch?"

The big man's eyes looked at the deck and he said nothing.

"Well?" snapped Riley. "Shpeak up. What about it? The second mate was frightened enough to leave. Why didn't you? Are ye too brave? Or—" and his voice was smooth as ice and deadly as poison—"did ye notice I was watchin' ye?"

There was still no answer from Big Frank and the rest of the crew watched him, some anxiously, some in amazement. The amazed ones included only the cook and Whisky Bill and Riley's heart sank at what he had to depend on—one lazy mate, one fat cook and one half-convalescent drunkard. But the thought only made the master set his jaws harder. Come what might, Big Frank had to be punished.

Jumping from the steps like a cat, Riley smashed a fist straight into Big Frank's eye and followed it up with the other fist.

"You'll lead the crew to desert, will ye?" snarled Riley. "You'll blow the ship because ye don't like the grub, eh? All right, you yellow sneak—try this!"

The big sailor tried to spar off the blows but the master was too eager and the mighty fists crashed through his guard. Big Frank came to with a man slushing his face with a bucket of water and the master standing over his prone body.

"You're awake, are ye?" bellowed the skipper, noting that the rest of the men were very quiet. "All right—get up!" The wobbly sailor was helped to his feet.

"Now," ruled the master, "you're due for chains but I'm short-handed. You'll help work the ship and at night you'll be locked in the afther lazaret. I'll take some o' that swagger out o' you or I'll kill ye! Hereafther I'll go armed. The first wrong move you make will be your last. Undershtand? Yes. Then go help the cook!"

Thus passed the first big episode of the trip across. Thereafter the ship bowled along with Riley watchful, the mate cautious, the crew subdued, and Whisky Bill beginning to show tan in place of the purple-red that once made his face livid. Watching the man's awkward attempts at sailor-work despite his awful physical reaction and noting that he never complained, Riley's heart warmed toward the derelict, though he avoided the slightest appearance of favoritism and drove the man with the rest. Gradually Bill's stagnant brain cleared, the half-paralyzed muscles whipped into shape, and he ate better, slept better, kept his sea-legs better. Riley was getting proud of his liquor-cure.

Whisky Bill's gratitude came on a sultry midnight weeks later when the skipper was sleeping in his bunk in the cabin. The mate's bunk was opposite his but the mate was on duty. There were no partitioned rooms for the officers. It saved space for more cargo.

The cabin door opened stealthily and a tiny shaft of the lighter gloom outside pierced the black darkness within. Not a sound was heard yet Riley sensed the thing and awoke with a start. Noting the streak of light he grasped the handle of a pistol under his pillow and lay ready for action.

The doorway widened until more than a foot of haze showed and a dark object crossed the threshold. Then the door began closing softly. That was the moment Riley was waiting for. Sitting upright, he had that form exactly covered with the pistol and his nerves were never icier.

"HANDS up!" he snarled. "Quick!"

"All right, sir," came a soft voice in reply. "Wait till I close the door."

The voice was Whisky Bill's and Riley grunted and pointed the pistol-muzzle downward, wondering what would come next. The door closed softly and footsteps pattered across the floor to the bunk.

"Well?" snapped Riley. "What does this mean?"

"I couldn't come any sooner," apologized Bill. "I'm on duty and the rest is sort o' watchin' me. You see, they're goin' to blow up the ship."

At this calm announcement Riley felt his muscles tingle and his scalp itch.

"Again? How? Who? When?" he rasped.

"In them straits near Japan. I forgot the name."

"Sangar. The Japs call it Tsugaru," said Riley. "We'll pass through to make the Japan Sea. That'll be about two weeks from now. How will this blow-up business be done?"

"Like last time. There'll be a fire an' everybody'll rush fer the boats, only this time there ain't goin' to be no heavy sea to put the fire out. The ship's goin' to blow fer keeps."

"Um. Yes," said Riley, sarcastically. "And what'll I be doin' while all this is goin' on—playin' solitaire?"

"No. You'll go natural to the fire and see what can be done. That's what you'd do, ain't it? Well, while you're lookin' at things the rest'll skip."

Riley was thinking hard.

"And how do you know all this?" he asked.

"Me? Oh, I'm one of them."

The statement was so cool and casual that it made Riley's brain buzz. "One of them?" he echoed, wondering whether to hug this man or shoot him for safety.

"Sure, I had to, or else—blooey fer me! If I didn't stand in I'd be suspicioned, so I stood in—see? I'm now the worst little grouch in the crew exceptin' Big Frank."

"I see," murmured the skipper, slowly. "And is the whole crowd in on the plot?"

"The whole gang—Big Frank an' Looie the Greek an' Changos the Sloavk, an' me. All but the cook. Every one's sick o' weevil biscuits an' four-year-old spuds an' condemn' corn beef an——"

"Enough!" groaned the skipper, irritably. "I'm sick of it too. But why should the crew want to jump ship when we're almost across?"

"Because it's a grudge now, sir. The other time they wanted to git away because o' the grub, but the way you handled 'em made 'em sore an' Big Frank's been jawin' an' grouchin' an' stewin' till they're all worked up. And—the grub's still with us."

"I see," murmured the thoughtful master, fingering the pistol carefully. "And was the second mate—and the two other men that left us—in on the first plot?"

"Naw!" replied Bill. "They was plain scared, like they was expected to be."

There was a long silence from the skipper's bunk, for Riley was thinking hard. Thrust by fate into this worthless and dangerous command and in trouble through no direct fault of his own, he was appalled at the relentlessness of the men he had counted in San Francisco to make into sailors; and yet through his thoughts ran a constant wonder at this half-cured derelict, Whisky Bill. The man owed him nothing except a job, and that was the poorest on the seven seas.

"Tell me," said Riley, suddenly. "Why did ye come to warn me?"

There was another long silence before the man's uncertain voice answered:

"You're a white guy. The rest of 'em's tramps. You're the only guy on the ship that shaves an' looks like somethin' human. I'm an American."

Although at first the skipper groped, he understood upon reflection. It was the call of caste and self-respect, to a man climbing up.

"I see," said Riley, putting bare feet on the dark floor, "and I see I can thrust ye. But," and his voice was speculative, "how good could ye be in a pinch?"

"I dunno, sir," admitted Bill, soberly. "Sometimes me heart acts wrong, but mebbe I can be some good. I'm Billy Kenyon."

"And who'se he?"

"I stood off Joe Gans fer ten rounds once," came the reply, not without pride, "an' then the booze come along. That's all, sir."

"I undershtand," murmured Riley, with pity in his voice. "But mebbe it'll not come to a fight. I've another plan. You say you're one with the gang forward. Do they thrust ye?"

"Almost. Not quite."

"'Tis well. Now listen. Barrin' head winds we reach Sangar Shtraits in just under two weeks. Pray there'll be no throuble before then or we'll be up in the air in more ways than one. But you've got near two weeks to prove yourself a majestic conshpirator. Undershtand? You'll be one of them—most valiant in cursin' ship an' skipper. Then when the time draws nigh you'll volunteer to fire the ship while the rest of the rats scuttle toward the whaleboat on the poop."

Riley heard his companion gurgle and wriggle but proceeded calmly.

"You'll get the job. They'll be lookin' for a sucker an' mebbe they'll be glad to be rid of ye. Now listen. The fire will begin in the foc'sle for that's the only place to give every one time to run for the star'bd whaleboat while the flames are eatin' through the forward deck plankin'. If the fire was tossed into the cargo hatchway — there'd be no whaleboat. Now, when ye get the word you'll see there's much shmoke and little fire forward, with a bucket o' water to put it out. Then your job is done—unless somethin' goes wrong."

Bill cogitated over this for some time, while from outside came the faint voice of the mate shouting an order to his watch. Riley was first to note it.

"Go before you're missed," he said. "Better not take the door. Go up the companionway. Mebbe the helmsman's asleep. And remembher what I told ye. I'll not forget your coming here this night. Now go!"

Obeying noiselessly, Bill groped his way upward till the faint sound of a hatch lifting and closing apprized the skipper that the man had gained the poop. Then Captain John Riley, his mind at ease because he knew what was ahead and when it would come, sank into his bunk and slept the sleep of a man without care.

* * *

TWELVE peaceful days followed, blessed by gracious winds that made the old schooner heel over skittishly like a sinful old crone dancing in her second childhood. Riley cracked on all sail and longed for topsails, but even as she was the old tub slapped her blunt bows in the lively waves and lumbered along with a foaming wake that gladdened the skipper's heart. True, the short-handed crew had to work the pumps a bit every day and the awful provender kept continuous nausea aboard, but the master felt that the worst was over and he waited for the anticipated climax calmly.

It came on the hazy morning of the thirteenth day when the old schooner was loafing her way into Sangar Strait. Fifty miles northward, beyond the vague curtain of haze that hid Volcano Bay, lay the island of Yezo; seventy miles straight ahead was Hakodate; and forty miles southeast was Cape Shiriya, northern rampart of Hondo, the mainland of Japan. Between the invisible landmarks stretched the gray-blue sheet of water clear to the western horizon, where a faint patch of dark smoke hung low in the heavy air. The old schooner's booms were slatting to port and starboard, sparring for puffs of wind, and the three jibs dawdled limply from the foremast. The ship was making bare steerage-way.

At ten o'clock Riley took his sight at the blurred sun and established position while Blazon napped below, Big Frank lounged in the waist of the ship, and the Slovak smoked lazily at the wheel. Whisky Bill and the Greek were supposed to be sleeping in the forecastle.

Suddenly, yelling at the top of his voice, the Greek burst out of the forecastle door, with a faint wisp of smoke following his shoulders. Big Frank jumped toward him and Riley, at the poop, lowered his sextant and knew the moment had come. His pistol was in his pocket but he kept it there.

"Fire!" yelled the Greek, breaking for the steps to the poop. "Fire forward! Fire!"

At the first shout Big Frank joined him and started aft, also yelling. The speed in their actions showed that quick developments were expected, and out of the tail of his eye Riley noted that the falls of the whaleboat were arranged for a quick launching of the craft. He knew the men would jump up the starboard steps and rush for that boat, and they did, and the helmsman joined them, while from the dark space beyond the forecastle doorway poured a denser column of smoke.

Riley sought the port steps and rushed for the deck. Once there he ignored the excited group at the whaleboat and hurtled toward the forecastle, where the smoke became denser. As he reached the door another figure came out, running head down.

"Halt!" yelled Riley.

Whisky Bill looked up, saw the master, and stopped.

"Is the fire out?" snapped Riley.

"Mostly," said Bill, grinning. "What comes next, sir?"

"You'll shtop laughin' before them thraitors on the poop see ye!" commanded the irascible skipper, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder. "You're bein' forced into the flamin' ruins by an overbearin' and heartless tyrant, so they'll not wait for ye!"

He heaved Bill into the smoky forecastle and tumbled in himself, closing the door.

The light from the blurred hatch above disclosed a strange sight to the coughing skipper. On the aisle between two rows of aged and smelly bunks stripped of their cheap blankets and quilts lay a pile of half-blackened, smoldering wet cloth and papers, leading to an oil can half-full of liquid ten feet away. Arising from the floor, Whisky Bill started to tip the contents of the can on the smoking embers. Riley jumped and grasped his hand wrathfully.

"Dhrop that!" he roared. "Are ye crazy?"

"Aw'right," obeyed Bill, "only it's water."

"Water?"

"Sure. That's my idea, sir. I told the others we'd better light the rags an' run a slow trail to the oil-can, so she'd explode sure inside of a minute. Then the fire'd be too big fer you to control when you got here. See? They said I was one bright guy. So I poured the oil out o' the can an' slipped water in. Then I stuck some oil around under the bunks to make it smell right. See?"

The revelation floored Riley.

"By all the saints!" he exclaimed, slumping against a bunk. "I'd never think it was in ye! You're a jewel, me lad—a jewel!" And he slapped the man's back affectionately.

Footsteps pattered on the deck outside and a hand fumbled at the door-latch, and the two men straightened suddenly. The door opened and the round face of Journet, the cook, peered in owlishly.

"I theenk I hear noise," he explained when he saw who was inside. "Some men, they leave very fast in a boat, sir. What is it?"

"It's throuble," said Riley. "The crew's deserted. Here—" and he handed the astonished cook the pistol—"take this and see that no one comes aboard."

Then Riley turned to Bill.

"Now that they've gone we'll go outside," he said. "Go you into the cabin, wake Blazong, and bring up all the arms you can get. Then go aft and 'wait orders. Let no one come aboard. Undershtand?"

Bill nodded and accompanied Riley on deck while the bewildered cook stood and fingered the unaccustomed pistol speculatively. Without a glance at the whaleboat being rowed frantically a quarter-mile away, Riley climbed to the deserted poop and took the wheel, slowly swinging the dynamite-ship back into her old course. And then, looking past the three big masts and the jibs, Riley's eyes widened.

Coming on with a bone in her teeth and a trail of black smoke pouring backward from thick stacks was a narrow-beamed gray warship. She was still far away but Riley saw she was headed in his direction and wondered if she had noticed the desertion of his crew; but just then, as Bill and the sleepy Blazon came up the companionway and joined the skipper, a puff of wind whipped the waters toward the schooner and caught the sails, making the old ship heel with renewed life.

"That's what I wanted!" muttered Riley, as he spun the spokes of the wheel. "Now we'll show them scoundhrels a little dishipline!"

OBEYING Riley's hand the schooner swung to port and began to overtake the laboring whaleboat. Inch by inch, foot by foot, yard by yard she gained on the astonished rowers until the long bowsprit towered above them and the big bows threatened to grind them under. Then, while the alarmed men in the boat were standing up and yelling and their oars began to slip out of the tholes, the master swung the schooner to starboard, passing them on the broadside but keeping a few yards away.

"Toss out a line!" roared Riley to Blazon and Bill, and they hurled a slim rope toward the whaleboat as the big ship lumbered by. The Greek in the bow of the smaller boat looked at Big Frank, in the stern. Frank nodded and the Greek made fast while Bill twisted the other end of the line about a bitt by the stern of the schooner. As the rope tightened it whipped the smaller craft under the stern of the dynamite-ship.

That was the moment Riley had been waiting for.

"Now, ye sneakin' scum, I've got ye where I want ye—you threacherous hounds!" he roared leaving the wheel and shaking a fist over the stern. "You'll shtick in that boat and do penance across the whole Japan Sea and then you'll face a court—you greasy swine! One wrong move and I'll hang you all. The first man that thries to come aboard here will be shot, and if any of ye thries to cut the boat adhrift—Gawd help ye! Undershtand?"

In the stern of the whaleboat Big Frank's right arm reached backward. Then the skipper's eye grew cold and he pointed an automatic carefully while Blazon and Bill stood ready to back him up. Big Frank's arm came half-forward with a big blue revolver. With a shriek the Slovak rushed upon him and grabbed at his wrist.

Faced at last with deliberate mutiny—for a man in the crew had brought forth a pistol against the master—Riley's gray eyes betrayed a flame that meant death for somebody; and yet his voice was soft.

"Throw that gun overboard," he purred, "or I'll finish the whole boatload of ye right now."

There was an instant of inaction. The upturned face of Big Frank was livid with rage but his wrist was frantically held by the terror-stricken Slovak, while the Greek cowered in the bow. Then, sullenly, Big Frank released his fingers from the pistol and it dropped into the foaming wake of the pitching, tossing whaleboat.

"'Tis well," Riley nodded to his companions. "And now we'll take turns at guardin' the shtern while the others work ship. It's short-handed we are—and Gawd help us if there's a blow—but praise be, we're rid o' them mutineers at last. Hello—what's this?"

Looking forward, the trio perceived the gray cruiser nearing them off the starboard bow, with her clipper-prow slicing the waves and her yards whipping backward in the wind she created. From her taffrail snapped a red sun-flag with numerous rays—the ensign of the Japanese navy. Even as the three men watched her several colored flags broke from the halyards over her high bridge.

"That'll be a Jap patrol-ship," said Riley, his eyes feasting on the trim lines of the big cruiser with its guns peeping from casements along the main deck. "Hello—there's signals. International code. They want us to shtop! All right. Shtop it is!" And he spun the wheel hard over.

The dynamite-ship swung into the wind to starboard and the cruiser drew up until the schooner's men could see the blue-clad Japs lounging about its decks. Then the warship forged by and stopped, her wash making the whaleboat bob up and down in the water like mad.

Five minutes later a dark-skinned sub-lieutenant scrambled aboard the sailing-ship from a launch, followed by six natty little armed sailors. With the dignity befitting the master of a better ship the trim Riley descended from the poop to bow his visitors aboard and the Japanese lieutenant returned the bow, coming to the point without further parley.

"I regret arrest this boat," said the officer, bowing again in apology unutterable.

The blow took Riley aback.

"Arresht?" he exclaimed. "What for?"

The officer shrugged his shoulders and pointed over the bulwark, toward the cruiser.

"Captain Itsibuki talk Eenglees," he suggested. "You go now?"

Though polite the request was so terse and full of meaning that the baffled Riley wondered what his crime was. His mind reverted to the happenings of the trip but he found no clue. Resistance was impossible and unjustified, though, so Riley determined to see this Japanese navy captain and have it out.

"All right," he sighed. "I'm ready as soon as I get my papers. And by the way—there's some men undher the shtern that need lookin' after." He pointed aft. "Watch 'em while I'm gone. They bad boys. You savvy?"

The Japanese bowed and grinned.

"Savvy, savvy," he replied. "I watch um."

This done, Riley collected his papers and started with Whisky Bill as companion in the launch for the warship, the mate staying with the schooner. All the way across the master tried to conjecture what it was all about and he kept wondering until ushered into the sacred quarters of the grizzled, mustached Japanese captain. Then Riley stood literally on the carpet, scenting the faint odor that permeates every Oriental habitation, while the navy man lolled in a swivel chair behind a fine roll-top desk. To the rear of Riley stood Whisky Bill and two Japanese orderlies.

"You are Captain Riley," tolled off the navy man, in precise English. "You command the *Experiment*, schooner, owned by Peter F. Slemm of San Francisco. You left that port April second with dynamite and gunpowder for the Export Transportation Department of Russia. Is that correct?"

"Yes," said Riley. "What about it?"

"Ah!" said the officer, shrewdly. "We shall see. You worked for Mister Slemm long?"

"This is my first trip undher him and my lasht!"

The officer's slightly slanted eyes looked more interested.

"What is that?" he asked softly.

"The ship, the grub, the men and the owner!" said Riley. "I'm a sailor, not a dog!"

And then, with tongue loosened at last and his outraged temper up, Riley burst forth into vituperation of Slemm that would have made that person's hair curl, while the officer smiled Orientally. Riley did not know what had taken him under the eyes of a world power; he only felt himself a catspaw in some game that was beyond his ken, played by a fat wolf of an owner without morals or scruples, and the skipper wanted to keep clear of its aftermath. From the man before him Riley expected neither sympathy nor enmity. It was a naval officer on duty.

"Go on," said the officer, offering a seat when Riley had finished. "Tell me about your voyage across. I think something must have happened."

Seeing he should tell the truth soberly and without trimmings, Riley started at the beginning and recited the whole story. At times he saw a peculiar light flashing in the brown eyes of the Japanese officer, but the latter said nothing until Riley was through. Then the navy man picked some papers out of a pigeonhole and faced the merchant skipper again, adjusting spectacles judicially.

"You are sure the food caused all the trouble?" asked the officer, peering over the spectacles and smiling.

"Why, of course," replied Riley, disgruntled because his story was questioned. "What else? Wasn't the grub rotten bad? If ye think different, try it!"

"And your cargo was for Russia?" persisted the officer.

"Certainly," said the irritated Riley. "Don't ye believe it?"

"Yes," nodded the officer, politely. "And this man—Big Frank—tried to burn your ship two times because of the food?"

THE Oriental officer's faint smile was bland but Riley sensed the undercurrent and scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Well, what else can it be?" he hazarded.

"I do not know. I am not sure. There was an agent who did certain evil work for a hostile foreign power and he left San Francisco very secret in the first part of April while American officers were looking for him very hard. It may not surprise you, but America is now at war with the nation he worked for. When you left port it was not. But even then the American laws were very badly broken by this man. They thought he left on some ship but they never found him.

"Now suppose," and the eyes of the Japanese were thoughtful, "suppose this man got on a schooner and then found it was dynamite and gunpowder for Russia, our ally. Would an agent for a hostile foreign power want the cargo to reach Russia? I think not. I think he would use any means to prevent it. And suppose the food was not good and gave excuse for making trouble? Suppose he thought himself able to destroy your ship and get away safely in a small boat?"

With eyes opening, Riley caught sight of dangers that might have engulfed him and was staggered.

"Wow!" he gulped. "I wondher if it's thrue? If it is——"

"Wait!" said the officer. "I can describe this agent. He has been looked for everywhere. Was he tall and with curly hair and very blue eyes and a blunt nose? Was he stooped somewhat in the shoulders? Did he have a little finger only half as long as it should be?"

"He did!" breathed the sober Riley. "It's Gawd's truth. That'll be Big Frank to a hair!" And Whisky Bill echoed him.

The Japanese officer allowed himself another cryptic smile and, without comment, opened a roll of paper and began reading slowly, translating Oriental characters into English as he went along. The subject was foreign to all that had gone before and as the others listened they wondered what it was all about.

"Michael Onstorff, traitor to Russia," murmured the reading officer. "Born in the Baltic provinces and educated at Dantzig. Held positions in diplomatic service until 1905, when he went into what you call the Department of the Interior of Russia. In 1913 he traveled in Afghanistan and India. In 1914 he received high position in the Siberian service. After that certain shipments of explosives went in secret from Vladivostok to men very busy with plots of enemies of the Allies in British colonies, especially India. Michael Onstorff was caught at it and shot at Vladivostok by the Russian garrison on May fourth, while you were at sea." And the officer closed the paper with a snap.

"Gee!" exclaimed Whisky Bill, while Riley scratched his head and wondered how to figure it all out.

"Onstorff," continued the imperturbable Japanese officer, "was the Export Transportation Department of the Russian Government. There never was such a department. It was—what you call—a graft on the side. It sent out munitions to be used by the enemies of England, Russia, Japan and the Allies."

Riley's face lit with new vision as he began to understand the real mission of his ship, but, turning it over in his mind, he found one question would not down.

"And Peter F. Slemm, the golden-hearted shipowner—how about him?"

"I can not tell," admitted the Japanese. "Maybe he thought he was very shrewd making big profit from the Russians. Maybe he did not know the truth. Very few did."

"Then," shouted Riley, excitedly, "Big Frank didn't know it and double-crossed his own people by trying to smash the ship they'd paid for—the people who'd gain by receivin' the cargo! Lord, what a mix-up! He didn't know who the cargo was for! It's the joke of the year—he didn't know it!"

"He could not have known or else he would have been the most obedient man on your ship," said the officer, soberly. "And now," he added, rising, "I have the great regret to keep you under arrest until the courts decide your case. We will take your schooner into Hakodate for examination. For yourself the arrest is only for a time, until the courts make a ruling. I fear no bad results for you, for your story seems to fit in every way. And after the way you saved your cargo, the Russian and Japanese Governments owe you a very deep debt." The officer bowed gracefully.

"Right," murmured Riley, returning the bow and preparing to leave, "and mebbe some time I'll command a real ship that's not run so cheap."

The officer's eyes met Riley and the officer understood.

"There are five big full-riggers to be delivered to English owners by the Kobe shipyards within a month, and trained masters are hard to find these days," he said, bowing again. "I would be much pleased to use my not small influence to get you to command one."

That ended the interview and lightened Riley's heart till it sang within him, for he knew his work was not in vain. Thus he went with his satellite up to the spotless quarter-deck of the cruiser and lounged by the breech of the big stern gun, watching a group of figures being shunted into a navy launch from a slattern schooner near-by. One of the figures had its wrists bound and squirmed in resistance, but it hurtled into the launch just the same.

"That," murmured Riley, judicially, "is a result of cheapness—the cheapness of a money-grubbin' human shark in the first place. Cheap ship, cheap food, cheap men, and I drew Big Frank because of it. Remember this all your life, me lad—little is good that comes cheaply!"

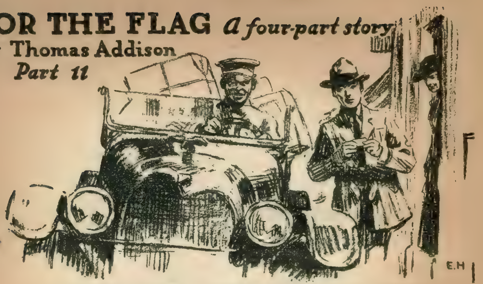
"Yeh?" challenged Billy Kenyon, Whisky Bill no longer, "how about me?"

"You?" And the master's face became soft as he faced the man. "That's right. You're different. I'll train ye for a mate's papers. Little is good that comes cheap—but sometimes there's a pearl in the gullet of a swine."

FOR THE FLAG *a four-part story*

by Thomas Addison

Part II



Author of "The Boss of Powderville," "G 2-Defective," etc.

The first part of the story quickly retold in story form

FATE pulls the strings of human destinies and the puppets at the ends of them move in ignorance of the force they are elected to serve.

Such a victim was James Perry, Jr., of Norfolk, Virginia. Convalescing from pneumonia he sailed South and landed at Cortina, the seat of Government of Zanhoria, Central America, the early part of April.

By a darkened bedroom window in her home in the Calle Dolores, Winifred Brewer stood looking out across the public park. It was eleven o'clock, the hour of retiring. A man's white-flanneled figure loomed in the rays of a street lamp. As he passed a poinsettia thicket a hand shot out. The man fell. Hands dragged the body swiftly into the bushes.

Screaming, the girl ran downstairs and out into the street. She did not stop for her father, who, alarmed at her outcry, had appeared in the hall below. In the street Winifred ran into Enrique Segovia. Together they searched the park and found Jimmy Perry prone under some bushes. Perry's head was bleeding from the blow. He had been robbed.

In Walter Brewer's home Jimmy's wound was treated. He introduced himself to his host and rescuers. Leaving the house, Enrique asked Jimmy if the latter remembered reading of a William Bowman, a Richmond real-estate dealer, who had absconded recently with a quarter of a million dollars. Jimmy did.

Apprehended by the police, Juan Lopez, Jimmy's assailant, disclosed information that lead officials to believe the Germans were trying to cause trouble between Zanhoria and the United States. Jimmy and Enrique planned, with the aid of officials, to checkmate the conspiracy.

Intent on calling on Miss Brewer, Jimmy was told she and her father had deserted the house in the Calle Dolores.

AT THE Banco Nacional, Jimmy and Enrique conversed with Señor Morales, the bank president, and were introduceed to Miss Mary Taylor, a traveler and author. Miss Taylor was the guest of Señor and Doña Morales, having just arrived from Guatemala.

Mopping the perspiration from his face, Señor Morales flipped from his pocket a card, bearing the letters "D—VIII—K." Jimmy picked it up and returned it to the banker.

From the bank, Jimmy went to the American Legation to call on the Hon. John Henry Lane, United States Minister to Zanhoria.

Closeted with the minister Jimmy asked him to send in the official code to Washington a letter to his father. Mr. Lane granted the request. Jimmy explained what he had learned about the German conspiracy.

In the street again, Jimmy saw Winifred Brewer drive by in an automobile and stop at a pharmacy. He hastened to her and petitioned her and her father's assistance to foil the German plot. She pledged herself to the cause.

The Brewers' new home, she told Jimmy, was at the Rafael Fernandez hacienda on the Santa Marta Road.

Shortly after President Wilson made his speech, prior to the United States' declaration of war on Germany, Jimmy, Enrique, Don Luis Valera, Secretary of State, and Don Emilio Ortega, State Superintendent of Police, questioned Lopez about what he knew of the conspiracy.

Lopez told of secret meetings of five mysterious men at Señor Morales' home. From his description one of the conspirators was recognized as Herr Adolph Kaufman, the German minister. At this juncture, Jimmy told of the card bearing the letters "D—VIII—K."

"Ah!" said Enrique. "It is simple. D stands for Domingo (Sunday). Thus, Domingo—the eighth—Kaufman. Kaufman writes to Morales from Arraca and sets a date for their meeting."

Arraca was a German lumber camp on the Rio Negro River.

Zanhoria's sympathies, Señor Valera explained, were with the United States, and the German scheme was to overthrow President Hurango of the Republic and place a German sympathizer at the head of the Government. By this means, Kaufman hoped to foment revolutions in Central America and thus divert a part of the United States' forces from her allies abroad.

The proposal to kidnap Kaufman was then made by Jimmy. He called on Brewer to obtain the use of the hacienda as a prison for the German minister. Brewer consented. While on the way to the hacienda, Jimmy met Mary Taylor, who broached him for a ride in his automobile. He declined gracefully.

Driving away from the Brewer place, Jimmy passed Miss Taylor, out riding in Señor Morales' car. She nodded to the American.

"I lied to her and she caught me," wailed Jimmy as he sped toward Cortina.

CHAPTER IX

MISS MARY TAYLOR PASSES

JIMMY returned the automobile to the garage, and walked back to his hotel. He was on the point of entering when he heard his name called. He swung around, and saw Enrique approaching.

"I thought you were about due," he said as he came up. "Hit it pretty close, didn't I?"

"You're a marvel," Jimmy told him. "Let's go to my room. I need a tubbing after that drive."

When they were behind the closed door of the bedroom Segovia put an eager question—

"Were you successful?"

"Yes. They will stand in with us tooth and nail."

Jimmy stepped into his bathroom and turned on the water. When he came back he said:

"I've got to do Brewer justice, Enrique. He came to the scratch like a man. Confound it, I'm sorry for him. He's paying an awful price for his liberty. He shows it."

"Did he suspect you?"

"I took good care that he didn't. I believe, though, Miss Brewer would be glad to know that I knew. It's hard for her to act a lie. The thing is eating her heart out. I'll be with you in a minute."

Jimmy had slipped off his clothes while he was speaking. He went into his bath, and Segovia lit a cigaret and waited. He took a newspaper from his pocket, folded it to a certain point, and mused over a short article his procedure had exposed. After a lusty splashing in his tub Jimmy came out.

"I say, old man," he broke forth, "isn't there another way to reach the Santa Marta Road than by the Avenue Alexander?"

"Yes, only I thought——"

"Oh, I saw the shack all right, but it cost me a fib, and I got found out in it." He grinned at Segovia's puzzled look, and started dressing. "Miss Taylor," he went on, "was in front, and I stopped and spoke with her. That's what did the business for me. I ought to have put on more speed instead of slowing down."

"What did you say?" In this newer interest Segovia forgot the paper he was holding.

Jimmy sketched the interview lightly, omitting as immaterial the incident of the rose.

"And by George," he added, "I ran plump into her as I was coming out of Brewer's place. She and Mrs. Morales were taking the air in the Morales car. If she mentions it to you, Enrique, tell her I was just poking about the country prying into more nooks and corners. We don't want to advertise the hacienda at this stage of the game."

Segovia delayed his answer until it caused Jimmy to throw an inquiring glance at him. Then it came.

"Why not tell Miss Taylor the truth? She is American. You don't have to talk with her long to find out her detestation of German methods in this world war."

Jimmy in turn delayed his answer under pretext of undoing a knot in his shoe-laces. At last he said:

"Do you know, Enrique, I have arrived at the conclusion that our friend Morales is a deuced shrewd old bird. Here he has an American as an intimate guest in his home. Who would suspect him of plotting against American interests? I wouldn't if I didn't know what I do. And I rather think you'd have hard work convincing Miss Taylor of it. If you succeeded she couldn't stay on as Morales' guest, and if she left his house she would also have to leave Cortina, or Morales would get wise to what had happened. Then good-by to the plans we've laid."

Segovia was compelled to admit the force of Jimmy's logic; but he made a weak stand against it.

"I thought that if she knew she might pick up some information for us. She is in a position——"

Jimmy calmly interrupted him.

"You didn't think any such thing, Enrique. You said that without thinking. To eat a man's salt and spy on him isn't a job you'd set for your sister, if you had one; and I'm blamed sure you wouldn't set it for Miss Taylor."

"Oh, hang it, Jimmy, let's drop it!" exclaimed Enrique, reddening darkly. "I hadn't thought of it in that light. Here is something that will entertain you—in *La Cronica*, our leading newspaper. I didn't see it until after you'd gone."

Jimmy could read Spanish better than he could speak it. As he mastered the interminable sentences of the little article Segovia pointed out his face crimsoned with annoyance.

In brief, Jimmy was hailed as the only scion of a powerful American millionaire with connections of political importance at Washington. He was a young man of brilliant parts and promise, and he was now in Cortina to visit his old college classmate in Virginia, the Señor Don Enrique Segovia. The two were to be the guests at dinner on Thursday night at the home of the Señor Don Manuel Morales, the eminent banker, where Mr. Perry would have the pleasure of meeting a fair compatriot, Miss Mary Taylor, the distinguished author and traveler who was but just arrived in Cortina from an extended stay in Guatemala, and who was the honored guest of the Señora Doña Morales.

"Great snakes!" sputtered Jimmy. "Who the devil put this rot in the paper about me?"

"I wondered," said Segovia. "Mr. Lane, do you think?"

"Lane? He's not a fool!" snapped Jimmy. "Who wants to be paraded in print like this at any time, and especially at a time when one seeks to move about with as little noise as possible? Lane knows that. This is some of Morales' doings, Enrique. He has made me a marked man, and under the cover of a compliment. A friend of the nephew of the secretary of state—look out for him! It's a warning to the anti-administration crowd."

"It does look like it," agreed Segovia. "I wish they'd start something in the open. This waiting gets on my nerves."

"And mine," echoed Jimmy. "I'm praying for Kaufman to come back harder than I ever prayed for a touchdown. Oh, I say! I haven't told you about the dandy birdcage I've found for our Hun. We got shunted off from it."

He recounted the pertinent details of his visit to Brewer, and described the strongroom, and the defensive properties of the house. They discussed the possibility of a rescue party, and Segovia expressed himself as heartily in favor of arming the defenders of the rural citadel. He could manage easily to get the rifles. He would speak to his uncle about it, or to Ortega.

"Of course I shall be with you, Jimmy," he declared when their conference was ended. "I am a private citizen now, and can do as I please."

He glanced at his watch and got up.

"Of course you won't be with us," contradicted Jimmy. "Your place is here in the city to ward off suspicion from the farm. If we both disappear along with Kaufman it will give his friends a twin clue to follow."

"It doesn't seem fair, but I suppose you are right," conceded Segovia reluctantly.

"That's a good boy." Jimmy grinned at him, and added artfully—"By the way, I forgot to tell you that the automobile took Miss Taylor's eye immensely—especially when she learned that it was yours."

Segovia tried to appear unconcerned in the face of this announcement.

"I'm glad she liked it," he said carelessly. "And that reminds me: I'm due in half an hour to drive Miss Taylor to the State Department to see my uncle. She wants to ask him questions about the country—things like that."

Jimmy clapped him on the shoulder.

"Go to it, old man! We are here today and gone tomorrow. In between we've got to show some speed or we won't get anywhere. Let's go down and have something with a lime and a straw in it before you start. I'm dry as a boneyard."

AFTER Enrique had gone Jimmy cast about him for something to do that would while away the time. It was twelve o'clock.

"Billy Smith!" he ejaculated. "Amusing little beggar. I'll have him to lunch."

He called up the legation. Smith of Pittsburgh himself answered.

"Oh," he said when he learned who it was, "you're the powerful son of that brilliant millionaire I've been reading about. Gosh, I'm all swelled up at knowing you."

"Stow it," Jimmy bade him. "I'm thinking of having lunch. Will you——"

A whisper broke in on him.

"His nibs isn't here. Gone to the State Department. Business or something."

"By George, that's funny," spoke out Jimmy before he thought. He pictured a meeting with Miss Taylor.

"A scream, ain't it?" concurred Smith. "John Henry thinks he's working."

"Confound you," Jimmy shot at him, "see if you can listen to me ten seconds without butting in. I was up early, and I'm getting hungry. Will you come over and have lunch with me? That's what I started out to say when you——"

"Say no more, or you may take it back," entreated Billy earnestly. "I'll fix it up with Whittaker and come on the run. And I'll think up the most expensive dishes on the way. What is money to the powerful son of a——"

"Go to the devil!" Jimmy barked at him, and hung up.

Half an hour later they were seated companionably by a wide, shaded window in the Europa's dining-room with a bottle of Moselle between them. Except for themselves the place was deserted, for the hour was early for luncheon. They had finished their cold consommé when Billy remarked:

"Look here, Jimmy, why is Lane asking for a warship off Puerto Mono. Oh, you needn't look innocent. It was after your jazz with his mightiness yesterday that he sent the cable. Whittaker told me."

Jimmy answered him frankly.

"I can't talk about that, Billy."

The other's broad face beamed.

"Good for you! I like you all the better for it. But I just want to observe that I'm not as blind as a bat or as deaf as a post, and I know something is up. What it is I can't guess; but if it comes to a show-down, and I can help, remember, please, my name and address. I speak German," he supplemented with a knowing nod. "There are one hundred thousand of them in Pittsburgh, thirty thousand foreign-born."

"I won't forget," Jimmy assured him warmly.

"Perhaps I ought to tell you," added Billy with a half-defiant, half-apologetic air, "that my grandfather was a full-blooded German—from Württemberg. His name was Wilhelm Schmidt. I'm the Americanized edition. And if you ask me I'll say that I'm not ashamed of my German descent, but—" he rapped the table with his knuckles—"I'm a Yankee from my gizzard out, and I'll fight any man who says I'm not."

Jimmy reached over and seized his hand.

"Not me, old chap. We stand shoulder to shoulder. Old Glory forever!"

Both were on their feet with the words.

"Old Glory—God bless it!" responded Billy. He drained his glass, and snapped the stem.

They went on with their lunch in new good-fellowship, and with an exchange of those large views of life that are at once the hope and hopelessness of youth. Then came a sudden digression.

"Ha!" exclaimed Billy. "I know that girl with Lieutenant Segovia."

In the street immediately in front of the window an automobile had slowed down for a jam at the hotel entrance. In the waiting car were Segovia and Miss Taylor. They did not chance to turn their eyes in Jimmy's direction, and they were gone the instant after.

"You say you know the girl?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"I mean," Billy corrected, "that I've seen her before. I don't know her name."

"Where did you see her?"

"In the Canal Zone. I took a run down there last week. A little vacation. I got back Monday. It was at the Gatun Locks I came across her. Sunday morning. She was off one of those Jamaica boats, I guess. She didn't see me; I was only a wart on the water wall to her. But, by jinks, she didn't miss anything about the working of the locks. She was in a regular trance over it."

"And did you see her after that?"

"No. She went on to Panama. I didn't. I've a friend on one of the ships at Colon, and I wanted to look him up before my boat left."

Jimmy toyed with his coffee-spoon.

"Do you know," he said presently, "I

think you are mistaken in this girl who has just passed."

"Oh, sure," snorted Billy aggrievedly. "I wouldn't know a good-looker like that after only five days. I'd forget those cute little curls, and—and by gosh, that sailor hat with the Harvard ribbon. Oh, boy! Ask me if I could be mistaken in my own three sisters I've got at home. I'd swear to her in a million!"

"Just the same you are barking up the wrong tree, my lad," insisted Jimmy. You've read that nauseous article in *La Cronica:* well, the girl you've just seen with Lieutenant Segovia is Miss Mary Taylor."

"What of it? Where does that put me in wrong?" demanded Billy.

"Why, Miss Taylor has just arrived here from an extended stay in Guatemala, the paper says; therefore she could not have been at Gatun last Sunday."

Billy leaned back in his chair and stared at Jimmy.

"Pinch me!" he implored. "If what you say is so I'm dreaming I made that trip to the canal."

CHAPTER X

THE CAMP AT ARRACA

AT YORO, on the line of the Cortina and Puerto Mono railway, a branch line strikes off to the southeast and after bumping the unhappy traveler over thirty miles of villainous road-bed brings him with a final bump into the terminal station at Arraca on the Rio Negro. Back of the town, to the south and west, the virgin forest extends in a mighty area unbroken save for the black, deep waters of the river, which creeps through it and out finally into the jungles of the coast levels, and on to the Caribbean Sea where it debouches twenty miles below Puerto Mono.

The German syndicate's timber concession lay on both sides of the Rio Negro beginning at a point one mile above Arraca. It was *verboten* to the townspeople, and to all strangers unless provided with a permit from the intendant at the Arraca Road gate. The tract was heavily wired off in the neighborhood of the town, and rangers saw to it that other points of access were guarded from intruders.

For two years now the operations at the camp had been as a sealed book to all but those intimately concerned with them. Rafts of valuable hardwood were floated down the river to the sea, and there loaded on waiting ships. This was public knowledge. For the rest no one knew what went on. But far in the timber there were things to be seen worth while.

A great open square, like a military parade-ground, bordered the river. On one side were the bunk-houses of the loggers. In each house, behind a locker door, was a gunrack, and each gun in the rack was a well-oiled Mauser. On the other side of the square a row of small cottages sheltered the gangmasters—officers' quarters they would have been called elsewhere. A large two-story structure stood at the head of the square facing the stream. The lower part was used as a commissariat, and the upper part as a club-house for those in authority. In the commissariat in addition to the usual stores was a battery of machine guns cloaked carefully from view.

Down at the river a number of swift sea-going motor launches were moored to the landing-stage, and in midstream a big flat-boat for floating freight up from the sea swung to anchor. On the opposite river bank were several huge metal tanks filled with gasoline and petroleum.

All this paraphernalia, with the exception of the guns, could have been plausibly explained to a chance visitor, but not so the stout mast with its wireless antenna that rose high above the surrounding trees back of the club-house. This apparatus was assuredly an oddity in a lumber camp, and hence the curious and uncurious alike were halted at the concession gate.

In the late afternoon of the day on which Jimmy Perry in Cortina was entertaining at lunch his friend from Pittsburgh, Herr Adolph Kaufman, the Imperial German envoy to Zanhoria, was seated in a room of the club-house on the Rio Negro. Ledgers, balance-sheets and other business records were spread out on the table before him. Three men of a military carriage bore the minister company. They were, in fact, reservist officers of the imperial army, though here in Zanhoria they masqueraded as plain lumbermen. Kaufman himself was anything but a martial figure, yet in his day he had served with the colors. He was short, and ruddy, with a paunch, a beard, and heavy-lidded eyes under great bushy brows—a coarse, gross, bowelless product of beef and beer and overweening racial self-sufficiency.

"I think we have finished, gentlemen," he said. "The affairs of the syndicate are in satisfactory order, and my inspection of the property shows that it is being worked to the maximum advantage. Our quarterly report will read well. I congratulate you. As for the greater matter which engages us, Señor Morales, as I have told you, has had word from me to issue a call to his committee for Sunday night—a final consultation. After that it remains only to hear from General Peralta, and strike!"

"I suppose there can be no doubt of this committee, Excellency, in the test?" It was a question from one who sat directly opposite the minister.

"If," Kaufman answered direfully, "I should give Hurango their names they would be stood up to a wall and shot. I could do it and sit safe myself. And they know this. Yes, Captain Karsch, I am sure of the committee—quite."

A gaunt, towering man who had been reflectively drawing on his pipe put it aside and spoke. He had the brusk manner of one who is accustomed to being heard.

"Let us recapitulate. General Peralta is off Jamaica in his yacht *Sea Bird* with fifty chosen men. Here at Arraca we have four hundred and fifty men. And in the capital we have one hundred and twenty men detailed to strategic points at the given moment. *Ja wohl!* On the night of the designated day I will dispatch, by way of the river to Puerto Mono, one hundred men in command of Captain Karsch to seize the cable station and cover Peralta's landing with their machine guns.

"I will leave fifty men to patrol the camp, and with the rest take possession of the railroad, cut the telegraph, and proceed to Cortina. On the Pacific slope Lieutenant Baer will take care of the Cortina and Boaco Railroad. This will complete the investment of the city. Before aid can reach Hurango we shall have Peralta in his chair—that is, if Morales and his people do their part. Am I correct, Herr Kaufman?"

"With two small exceptions, Colonel Ludolf."

"And they are?"

"The Zanhorian National Guard for one."

"*Poof!*" Colonel Ludolf blew the Guard into ineffectual fragments. "A mere rabble."

"THEY are six hundred strong in Cortina," said Herr Kaufman quietly. "We are counting on defections to Peralta, but not until he is at the gates of the city."

"*Poof!*" scoffed the officer again. "We shall take the town by surprise, under cover of darkness. We shall have the arsenal. What can they do against us? Your other point, if you please."

"The designated day. That is an unknown quantity as yet. And everything hinges on it. If the legation wireless had not broken down I would have had news from General Peralta by this. Miss Prietz has undoubtedly arrived in Cortina from Jamaica with letters from him—information he would not dare wire from the *Sea Bird*. It may be that we shall hear at any moment now."

The fourth man, considerably younger than the others, had been listening in silence. He ventured a remark here, a pleasantry, it seemed.

"Haven't we in all this overlooked the Zanhorian navy, Excellency?"

Kaufman chuckled at the sally. The Zanhorian navy consisted solely and wholly of an antiquated gunboat—a relic of the Spanish-American war—mounting one four-inch gun fore and aft, and a secondary battery of three-pounders.

"Our U will attend to the navy, if necessary, Karl," he said. "But I am informed by the Peralta party at Puerto Mono that they have Admiral Terrozas well in hand. They probably have promised him a second-hand torpedo boat to add to his fleet."

The laugh that greeted this was checked by a knock at the door.

"Come in!" called Ludolf.

The wireless operator entered. He saluted, tendered the colonel a code message he had just taken, and retired.

"Ha! From Cortina!" exclaimed the minister.

"No. From the U," announced the colonel. He deciphered the dispatch. Kaufman looked his disappointment.

"Where is von Kumpel?" he inquired sourly.

"At his base, Matina Cay. He asks for oil."

Matina Cay was a palm-grown islet forty miles off the mouth of the Rio Negro. Ludolf turned to the young man Kaufman had addressed as Karl.

"See to it, Lieutenant Hecht—two hundred gallons. Be ready to start at dark. Show the usual lights when you have cleared the river."

Hecht left the room. Colonel Ludolf drew a sheet of paper to him, and set about answering the submarine.

"Have you any word for Kumpel?" he inquired of Kaufman.

Kaufman thought a moment.

"I am returning to Cortina on the evening train, and shall see Miss Prietz tomorrow," he said presently. "You might say to von Kumpel that he shall know 'the day', it is likely, by tomorrow night."

Colonel Ludolf prepared his message, and requested Captain Karsch to see that it was sent. When Karsch was gone he said to the minister:

"It is not possible that Hurango is totally in ignorance of our movements. The thing is unbelievable. And yet, you say, there is no evidence of disquiet in his official family."

"I repeat it," Kaufman stated gruffly. "Our precautions have been such that not a whisper has reached them. If it were otherwise there would be some stir in the departments. All is quiet as the grave."

Ludolf knitted his brows. But he knew Kaufman. Argument would only irritate him.

"And the American envoy, is he too asleep?" he asked.

"Lane!" Kaufman pursed his mouth in a *poof* of his own. "He snores—*'ein Narr sein Leben lang.'* "

The officer smiled his recognition of the phrase, and rose.

"If you must take that train, *mein Herr*, we had better be moving," he suggested. "The horses are ready."

Herr Kaufman lifted himself from his chair in quick response.

"I wouldn't miss it for the 'Black Eagle'," he declared. "Miss Prietz will have news for me. A remarkable woman, Colonel. *Ja!* The best, I believe, that we have on this side the water. She has done excellent work in all the Isthmian States. They will fall in line if Peralta succeeds. Then we shall see—eh—the 'United States of Central America.' And confusion at Washington."

Colonel Ludolf came to a salute. His eyes glittered.

"*Hoch der Kaiser!*" he intoned in his heavy bass.

He marched to the door, and stood aside. Kaufman bowed and passed out before him. He walked with a slight limp.

A MAN loitered along the platform as the train for Yoro and Cortina pulled out. When it had bumped around the curve beyond the water-tank the man loitered on to the post-office in the public square and asked for a telegraph blank. On this he wrote:

Look for your package on Arraca train tonight.

The telegram was addressed to a cigar store on the Plaza Central in Cortina.

CHAPTER XI

THE WOMAN IN GRAY

JIMMY and Billy Smith were lounging over their after-luncheon cigars in the rotunda of the Europa when the hotel motor bus deposited at the door a lone woman guest. A page received her suit-case and conducted her to the desk. She was an inconspicuous little body in traveling gray. As she passed them Jimmy noticed that she was not old, and that her face was small and dark and plain. At the same instant he was conscious of being swept in by eyes—himself and Billy and the entire place—with one swift, comprehensive glance.

"German," murmured Billy.

"No; Cuban. Spanish blood anyway," said Jimmy.

"Cigars on it."

"Done!"

They were too far away to catch her conversation with the clerk, one Mr. Ricardo Gomez, who spoke half a dozen languages with a reckless fluency that answered for whatever shortcomings of construction it betrayed; but when at length the page had led the lady to the *ascensor* to be taken up to her room Billy sauntered over to the desk. He came back after a few minutes. His short nose was twitching comically.

"We both lose," he stated.

"What is she?"

"Guess. She is registered as Mrs. Rebecca Isaacs of New York. Speaks English, Ricky says, as well as he does."

Jimmy laughed.

"I'll buy just the same. But I say, this is the train I came in on. There's no boat due to-day."

"Elders & Pinsch Line—freight from Jamaica," Billy told him. "Good old scows, if you are not looking for speed. Well, I've got to toddle along or Whittaker will be having a fit. Any message for his loftiness?"

"Only my love," Jimmy grinned. "Come on and have your cigar."

"I guess not," returned Billy indignantly. "If I do belong to the down-trodden poor I can still manage to find the price of a smoke for a rich friend. I got it off of Whittaker before I came around here."

Jimmy knocked about the lobby listlessly for a while after Billy had left him. Time hung heavily on his hands. He had no appointment with Enrique for the afternoon, but it was likely he would look him up when he returned from his outing with Miss Taylor. At night Enrique was to dine with him at the hotel.

Jimmy yawned. He wished now that he had gone with Billy to the legation. Lane might have news of some kind to give him. He might have heard from Washington. Congress might have acted on the President's war message. If it had Lane would of course get immediate word. He glanced at the office clock. It was 1:30. No, Lane probably was at lunch; or, possibly, he was still at the State Department.

Jimmy decided to go up to his room and take a siesta. Later he would walk around to the legation. He had himself carried up to his floor. As he stepped from the elevator he saw, issuing from the room across the corridor from his, the new arrival. He lifted his hat as they met, and then stopped suddenly and spoke.

"I beg your pardon—your glove."

It had slipped from her hand as she passed him.

"Thank you ever so much," she said, and proceeded to the waiting lift.

"New York all right," Jimmy confided to himself. "And not from Baxter Street. Wonder what she's doing down this way alone?"

He made ready for his nap, and went to the windows to darken them. As he stood fumbling with the cords of the jalousies he saw Mrs. Isaacs making her way from the hotel across the plaza. He watched the little gray figure indolently. It took the path leading to the northeast corner of the square, and disappeared in the Calle Commercio.

"Going to see Lane. Has troubles of her own," surmised Jimmy. "But she'll have to pass Billy first. I'd like to hear what he says to her."

He smiled sleepily, and turned to his bed.

IT SEEMED to Jimmy that he had barely closed his eyes when he was awakened by a pounding on the door. The voice of Billy Smith came to him demanding to know if he were alive or dead.

"I was half-way between, contwist you!" Jimmy shouted to him irately. "Can't you let a man have his nap in peace?"

He got up nevertheless, and opened the door.

"Nap!" burst out Billy as he entered. "If you started in when I left you've sawed enough wood to build a house. It's five o'clock. Here's a cable for you. It came just as we were shutting up shop. And say, the devil's broke loose, it looks like. Lane got a hurry-up call from the State Department an hour ago, and went off in a cloud of fuss and feathers."

Jimmy was reading his cable. It was from his father, and it said:

Satisfactory. Got a bet down on you.

"Good old dad!" he murmured affectionately. He looked up at Billy. "What were you saying about Lane?"

Billy rolled his eyes ceilingward.

"I said he had a toothache, and had gone to have it out."

Jimmy threw a pillow at him.

"Talk sense, or I'll drown you in the bathtub. What has happened?"

"If I knew I'd be at the Department instead of John Henry. It's something Whittaker even doesn't know. His prominency got a dispatch from Washington today in the private cipher, and decoded it himself. Then he went to see Señor Valera. Now he's gone again in answer to Valera's S. O. S. It's to do with that dispatch or I'm a Hindu. The warship maybe. What?"

"Maybe," said Jimmy as he pulled on his shoes, "they are getting up a dance. I've known men to go off their heads over a thing like that."

"You go hang!" retorted Billy. He perched himself on the writing-table and swung his legs to and fro. "You can't get by me with that sort of bunk. You're just as full of curiosity as I am to know what's doing."

"Well, yes, I am," conceded Jimmy. "But I'm going to keep the cork in until it will do some good to draw it." He added with a tinge of seriousness— "This war we are in, Billy—or will be when Congress acts—is going to start a lot of things to happening."

He plunged his face into the washbowl. Billy regarded the broad shoulders turned to him with schoolboy admiration.

"Yes, and right here," he remarked when Jimmy withdrew his face from the bowl. "You said you wouldn't forget me, and take it from your Uncle Ezra, Mr. Readycash, I'm not going to let you. I can shoot, swim, sail a boat, drive a car, and I wouldn't balk at an airplane if I was put to it."

"*Sh!*"

Jimmy raised his hand. He had heard, he thought, a movement just outside his door. He strode to it, and opened it. A little figure in gray was in the act of inserting a key in the door across the hall. Her back was to him, and he drew in quietly.

"What the Sam Hill ails you?" queried Billy.

Jimmy softly lowered his transom. Then he said with a lurking grin:

"I have a neighbor. A Mrs. Rebecca Isaacs of New York."

"Oh! So she's on this floor?"

"As I have said. You had a call from her this afternoon, something tells me."

"Something lies to you then," rejoined Billy; but he evinced interest in this new topic. "Queer! I was going to speak to you about this Mrs. Ikey. What made you say that?"

"A little while after you left I saw her go out. She turned into your street. There are no shops up that way, so I thought she was going to you to have a grouch removed."

Billy grinned back at him.

"Wrong again. She didn't stop. She didn't give us even a look. She went straight on to the German legation and blew in. I watched her. Struck me as kind of funny, an American going into that joint. I kept an eye open, but I didn't see her come out. Missed her, I guess. But she couldn't have been there all that time—hardly."

"Um," grunted Jimmy. He was busy with his cravat. "You said she came in from Jamaica?" He was recalling what Billy had surmised of Miss Taylor—that she, too, had come from the island.

"Ricky said she did," the boy replied. "She might have come from anywhere on the Puerto Mono Road."

"Arraca?"

"The German concession. Aha! I begin to smell a mouse. And that warship! Look here, Jimmy, is it because I'm in the Service that you won't let me in on what is up?"

"Partly."

The young fellow jumped down from the table.

"Darn the Service!" he yapped. "I'll cut it, that's what!"

"Not so loud," Jimmy cautioned. "I've a neighbor, please remember. And furthermore, my son, you'll stick to that job of yours, for a while anyway. I've made you a promise I mean to keep, if I see a chance to use you. That's all you'll get out of me for the present. Will you be a good boy, or won't you?"

"I'll be good," vowed Billy meekly.

Jimmy put on his hat, and with a cat's tread went to the door. He opened it with a quick jerk.

"I'm going down. Come on," he said.

When for the second time that afternoon he had parted with Billy in the hotel lobby Jimmy watched for a chance to speak privately with the clerk. He thought he had seen Mrs. Isaac's door close as he stepped out from his room. Had she been listening in the hall?

Jimmy acknowledged that the incident in itself was trivial. He would not have given it a thought were it not for what Billy had told him of the woman's visit to the German mission. This nagged at his understanding; the fingers of his mind twiddled with it irresolutely. Why should this person on the instant of her arrival in the city seek out the representatives of a nation with which her own country was on the brink of war? It did not somehow look right; and yet what was wrong with it? Her errand may have been simply to ask information on a business matter—Germans were active in business in all the Central American States.

"Deuce take it," he grumbled, "I asked that boy to lunch for entertainment, and I get a bunch of worries handed me. He saw

Miss Taylor in the South when she came from the North, and he saw this Mrs. Isaacs hobnobbing with the Huns when she should have been gossiping with him. I can't make head or tail of it."

His opportunity came, and he went over to the desk.

"I see you have another visitor from the States," he remarked casually to the multilingual Ricardo.

"*Si*, Mr. Perree. A lady with sorrows, sir, from what I make intelligence. *Un-tio* (a hunkle) who loses himself, and she have make to trace him by Porto Rico, San Domingo, Cuba, Jamaica—*di grado in grado*—and now, *enfin*, she achieve to this *locale*."

"Oh, she has heard of him then?"

"But a whisper, Mr. Perree. Some one she have seen in Kingston have remark him in Cortina at the German legation."

"But she is an American, a Jew, from New York. How is it that her uncle——"

"Ah! I myself make question to her of that *con discrecion*. He is born in Germany. He departs away before the war. There is property to divide, *un hermano* who dead is in Chikkago. Her *padre* is *enfermo*, and she must come with herself *toute seule*."

"And what did she learn at the legation?" Jimmy asked.

Mr. Gomez shrugged his shoulders to his ears.

"*No sé*. She have her key, and do not cease by me when she return."

"I hope she finds him," Jimmy said, and walked away. To himself he said: "Jews don't send their women-folk chasing about the world alone. It sounds pretty thin to me."

He brought up with a grunt of surprise. Segovia was coming toward him, and his air was anxious and harassed.

"Hello!" Jimmy saluted him. "I wasn't expecting you till seven."

Segovia drew him aside.

"The dinner must wait," he said. "My uncle desires to see you. It is important. Will you come at once, Jimmy, please?"

"I certainly will. Do we drive?"

"No. We will walk. We must avoid attention."

"Then laugh a little," prompted Jimmy, "and we'll ease out of this as if we were going on a lark, and not to a funeral. Act the part, Enrique."

He followed his own advice, and Segovia made out to play up to him. When they were in the street they strolled west along the square to the Calle Central. Here they turned northward. Jimmy seized the opportunity when no one was within close hearing to put the question that was clamoring in him for utterance.

"What has broken loose, old man? Slip it to me with a smile—the world is looking on."

Segovia endeavored to comply, but his smile was more of a grimace than a gladdening twist of the features.

"An important State paper is missing from my uncle's office," he said. "A Washington dispatch. Mr. Lane brought it. The devil of it is, Jimmy, Uncle Luis missed it only a short time after Miss Taylor and I were there. He sent for me, but there was nothing I could tell him, of course. How could there be? The thing is past understanding."

Jimmy did not comment on this. Instead he asked—

"Do you know what the paper was about?"

"My uncle will tell you," Segovia answered. "But in a word, it was a warning to our Government saying that General Peraltà is in Jamaica, and is planning an armed descent on Zanhoria."

Jimmy whistled softly.

"So they got on to it in Washington! By Jove, Uncle Sam isn't so slow as the Germans think he is!"

CHAPTER XII

THE STOLEN STATE PAPER

THEY came finally to the Plaza Mayor, with the Government buildings to the east and west, and the executive mansion, embowered in its gardens, to the north.

"We are going to Don Luis Valera's office?" queried Jimmy who until now had manifested no curiosity touching their destination.

"No," Segovia replied. "We are going to see the president. We will slip in by the side entrance. We are expected there."

"Um, the devil is to pay sure enough!" exclaimed Jimmy to himself.

Still pursuing their rôle of leisurely pedestrians taking the evening air they sauntered across the great square with its bronze equestrian statue of Francisco Zamora, the liberator, and debouched at the east end of the White House of the Zanhorian Republic. They strolled north along the low garden wall. As they came to an opening in it Segovia stopped. A sergeant of police was loitering toward them. Segovia spoke to him, a low-breathed word.

"*Vayase*," he answered, and passed on.

"Quick! In with you," Segovia said to Jimmy, and followed on his heels.

They were swallowed up in the shrubbery, and made their way swiftly to a door under a small portico at the farther end of the walk.

They were, as Segovia had said, expected. The door opened as they approached. A man in plain black, who stood unobtrusively back in the entrance, looked narrowly at Segovia, bowed, and noiselessly closed the door after them. He conducted them up a corridor and across a colonnaded patio in which a tinkling fountain made pleasant music. A lemon-tree grew by the fountain, and there were roses and jasmine in bloom all about. Above the first stars were blossoming in the sky.

From the patio they entered another corridor, and were invited into a waiting-room overlooking the court. Their attendant disappeared. A moment later a young man came in. He bowed ceremoniously to Jimmy, and went with extended hand to Segovia.

"*Ola, amigo! Como le va?*" he exclaimed cordially.

Segovia introduced him to Jimmy. He was the Señor Don Leon Machada, President Hurango's private secretary. After a few courteous words he begged the young men to follow him. They passed down to the end of the corridor and were ushered into a spacious rose-tinted chamber where, advancing to meet him, Jimmy beheld the Hon. John Henry Lane. There were three others in the room—Don Luis Valera, Don Emilio Ortega, and a massive old man with piercing black eyes, and a lined, strong face. He had risen as the secretary announced the callers and, with a friendly gesture to Segovia, stood waiting, his eyes intent on Jimmy.

Mr. Lane had received a personal cable that afternoon from Senator Perry. It commended Jimmy to his care, and he was glowingly filled with the responsibility. He conducted his charge to the fine old man towering above his entourage.

"Mr. President," he said unctuously, "I have the honor to present Mr. James Perry, Jr., of Virginia. His father is one of our very influential citizens, and his uncle, United States Senator Allan S. Perry, is chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations."

President Hurango shook hands with Jimmy.

"You are very welcome, Mr. Perry. I speak your tongue but indifferently, though I am better, I hope, in the understanding of it."

"Sir," replied Jimmy, with an aptness which astonished himself, "if I could say in as good Spanish what you have just said in English I should consider myself a master of the language."

A smile went the 'round of the room. Mr. Lane swelled with pride. The chief executive was manifestly pleased.

"Thank you," he said simply. "Please sit down, Mr. Perry."

The door was again opened by the private secretary, and a seventh man was shown in. He wore a wax-pointed mustache, and carried himself, Jimmy fancied, a little pretentiously. He brought his hand up in a military salute to the president. This ceremony performed he bowed to the others of the group, and strode forward. He was, Jimmy learned when presented to him, General Don Alfredo Barrios, Minister of War and Marine.

A silence settled on the company. President Hurango motioned to Don Luis Valera, who turned to Jimmy.

"This, Mr. Perry, is a secret conference to decide on a line of action for the protection of the State. His Excellency the president has been made aware of your interest in the events that are pending, and the patriotic reasons that influence you. It is because of this that he has requested the honor of your presence. He wished to be made acquainted with you."

Jimmy was in something of a flutter at the attention concentrated on him; but he bowed his acknowledgment, and Don Luis proceeded.

"We have come to a pass in which it is necessary to abandon the pretense of official ignorance of what you propose, though at the same time we must continue to maintain the appearance of it. In short, Mr. Perry, our hand has been forced, and yet not to the point where we can take open action against our enemies. His excellency the American minister will perhaps be good enough to explain what has transpired today."

Lane, not in the least unwilling to take the center of the stage, hemmed with forensic momentousness and began.

"I RECEIVED, James, a dispatch from the State Department at Washington, and was charged to transmit it without delay to the Zanhorian Government. This disptach stated that information had reached Washington from a reliable source to the effect that General Frederico Peralta is in hiding on the southern Jamaican coast with certain followers, and is planning a descent on Zanhoria. In support of this news was the further information that a large white yacht has been seen standing off and on in the neighborhood, presumably to take on the Peralta party when they are ready to launch their coup."

"How about the Jamaican Government?" asked Jimmy as the minister paused. "Do they know this?"

"The Crown governor has been informed by Washington," Lane replied, "and will doubtless take steps to thwart the filibusters if he is not too late. Peralta has chosen, no doubt, an inaccessible point for his rendezvous. It is in view of these facts, James, that we are met here tonight. The dispatch that I handed to his excellency, Señor Valera, today is missing from his office, or, rather, one of the three copies made of it by his excellency's secretary for the various departments of the Government has disappeared.

"I presented the note to Señor Valera at one o'clock. We were in conference on it until two. Between those hours—nearer one than two, I should say—Señor Segovia and Miss Mary Taylor called. Señor Valera sent out a request to his nephew to return later, and—" Lane came to a pause; then he added—"and that, I believe, Mr. Secretary, is the extent of my personal knowledge of the—ah-ahumph—calamity that has befallen."

"Good Lord," thought Jimmy, "won't they ever get to the point!"

It was on the tip of his tongue to put the question that was once propounded by a celebrated personage of his own country—"Who do you suspect?" But he checked the impulse. These diplomats had their ways, and who was he to try to change them?

Señor Valera took up the thread of the American minister's narrative.

"My confidential secretary was at his lunch during the time of his excellency's call on me. He came in shortly afterward, and I instructed him to copy the note in triplicate. Meanwhile the Deputy Señor Carrera from the Province of Puerto Mono came in to see me. His errand was of importance, and we were in consultation for upward of an hour.

"It was during our conference that my secretary placed the note and copies on my desk. As the Señor Carrera withdrew, my nephew and Miss Taylor were again announced. I invited them in with the intention of asking Miss Taylor's indulgence if I begged her to postpone our appointed interview to another day. At this moment Señor Carrera reappeared at the door. There was something he had omitted to say, and I stepped outside to hear him. The papers remained on my desk.

"I was gone possibly five minutes. When I returned I spoke with Miss Taylor briefly, after which she and my nephew departed. I went into my secretary's room to say a word to him, and then made ready to deliver in person a copy of the note to the president, and another afterward to General Barrios at the War Department. It was at this juncture that I discovered that one of the three copies was missing."

The room was still as Don Luis finished. Jimmy glanced at Enrique. He returned it with a somber look. Señor Ortega, Jimmy observed, was lying back in the corner of a small wicker *canapé*, his eyes half-closed. The war secretary was fingering his mustache with ill-concealed impatience. President Hurango sat impassively in his great armchair so placed that it commanded the entire company. He spoke.

"I deemed it proper that you should learn in detail these facts, Mr. Perry. I have but one question to ask—these friends at the Rafael Fernandez hacienda—you can rely on them?"

"They are Americans, sir," said Jimmy.

There was the flash of a smile in Ortega's eyes at the response. The president bowed, and turning from Jimmy addressed the company in general.

"We are not so much concerned at present with the identity of the person who abstracted the dispatch as with the effect the information it gives will have upon the enemies of the State. It will, I am inclined to believe, precipitate action on their part. Our consideration should be directed, then, to the specific means of circumventing them before they can strike."

The war secretary was not in favor of secret measures, it appeared.

"I would suggest the immediate suspension of the civil authority," he put forth in Spanish, and with a fierce twirl of his mustache.

"Your Excellency!" It was Segovia.

He was on his feet, pale and greatly stirred.

The president motioned him to proceed.

"I can not consent, sir," Segovia said, "to sit on in silence under the imputation that rests upon myself and my companion of the afternoon——"

"Enrique!" Don Luis Valera's voice rose in stern protest. "The president has disposed of that question. And the country's welfare waits."

"Your Excellency, may I not defend my honor before you—now, while the lash stings?" appealed the young man passionately. "My life is my country's, but my honor is my own; can not my country spare to me a moment for the defense of that without which my life is an unworthy gift to her?"

The old man in the chair inclined his head to him in grave sympathy. The hot blood had once burned in his own veins, and he remembered it.

"Speak on, Don Enrique," he invited, "though I will say that your loyalty has not for an instant been in doubt."

"Then, sir, it is a question of probity between the Deputy Señor Carrera and Miss Taylor. There were no other callers. Señor Valera accounts for the deputy. I account for Miss Taylor. Which of the two, may I inquire, is accused—the deputy or Miss Taylor?" His tone was derisive as he challenged the faces before him.

DON LUIS turned from him with an expression of severe intolerance. But the State superintendent of police, from his corner on the sofa, answered the question with a question. It was gently put.

"You were seated, Don Enrique, while awaiting the return of his excellency from the door?"

"Yes, señor."

"Near the desk?"

"Not far from it; at the end facing the door."

"And neither of you moved?"

Segovia hesitated, but it passed, and he said—

"I crossed the room to draw a glass of water from the cooler in the corner."

"For Miss Taylor—at her request?"

"It was, Señor Superintendent." There was a strained sarcasm in the reply. "And I will say—for it is that you are leading up to, I infer—that my back was not turned to Miss Taylor thirty seconds, if as much. The lady is distinguished as an author, señor, not as a prestidigitator."

He sat down defiantly.

"No slightest offense intended, my dear friend," disclaimed Ortega blandly. "And when you left the Department?"

"I drove Miss Taylor home."

"To the Señor Morales' house?"

"Yes, señor. She is the guest of the Señora Morales; and I will call your attention to the outstanding fact that Miss Taylor is an American, and entitled to the protection of his excellency here, the American minister."

The Hon. John Henry Lane moved uncomfortably in his seat. To all, except the obsessed Segovia, the deductions to be drawn from the superintendent's inquisition were obvious. Ortega relieved the situation. He addressed the president in mild regret.

"You see, sir, the mystery remains unsolved."

President Hurango, impassive as ever, made a motion of assent.

"We will let it rest there until a more convenient time. What we must consider now are the steps for our defense."

General Barrios answered him.

"I have had the honor, sir, to advance a suggestion."

The president shook his head.

"I am of the opinion, General, that the better way is that with which I have acquainted you. No overt act has been committed. To parade our strength might check but would not end this revolutionary movement. It would rise again. To put it down quietly by removing the *agent provocateur* from the scene appears to me the simpler method—and the speedier." He turned his penetrating gaze on Minister Lane. "Are you in accord with me, sir?"

The diplomat cleared his throat as if of an obstruction that impeded a prompt response.

"Er — ah — ahump — unofficially, Señor Hurango, I may say that—er—ah—I am."

The president let his eyes pass on to Jimmy.

"Mr. Perry, I have decided to adopt your plan. If you succeed, the unexpressed thanks of two Governments will be yours."

A snort that was converted instantly into a cough proceeded from the direction of General Barrios.

"It is not my plan, sir," Jimmy hastened to explain. "It is Enrique's. He thought of it."

The old man looked at Segovia, and nodded kindly.

"Yes, I know, and the hazard of it. We shall do all that can be done to protect you. Openly we shall be obliged to disavow an act that is in violation of the laws of nations. It is not an enviable position for us, yet I am constrained, for the reasons advanced, to accede to it."

A gentle tap was given at the door, and Machada entered.

"A lieutenant of police has brought a message for the señor superintendent," he announced.

He crossed to Ortega and handed him a printed envelope.

"With your permission, Señor President?" requested the superintendent.

He silently read the message——

Look for your package on Arraca train tonight.

Ortega glanced at Jimmy though his words were for the president.

"Your Excellency, I am able to inform you that the Imperial German minister is returning to the city. He will arrive at ten o'clock tonight."

"The guns, Enrique! Kaufman won't wait for the eighth now," cried Jimmy forgetful of the presence he was in.

Enrique made him an assuring gesture. He had recovered his poise, though his eyes still gloomed. President Hurango rose.

"Gentlemen, I will call this meeting adjourned. I think that we shall find refreshments in the adjoining room, if you will honor me."

As they went in Jimmy discovered Ortega at his side. Jimmy addressed him eagerly.

"Why not tonight, señor?"

"Tomorrow night," said the other.

"But I dine with Señor Morales tomorrow night."

"Will you wager with me on that, Mr. Perry?"

"What! I say, you don't think——?"

"If you will call at my office tomorrow at eleven I will tell you what I think," replied Ortega with an obscure smile. "In the meantime shall we lay the wager—say a ripe banana?"

Jimmy laughed.

"Let's be reckless. Make it two, the loser to eat all four."

But he wondered, nonetheless, what Ortega could have up his sleeve.

CHAPTER XIII

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

THE little company dropped away as they had come, one by one, and on foot; all with the exception of Jimmy and Segovia—they slipped away together. The police sergeant was loitering on the opposite side of the street as they came out of the garden. Jimmy caught a glimpse of him under a spreading crêpe myrtle.

"There's Don Emilio's man again, piping us off," he observed, solely in the hope of promoting conversation.

Enrique had held himself moodily aloof in the dining-room.

"Ortega is an ass," pronounced the Zanhorian acidly.

"What kind?" chuckled Jimmy. "There's Balaam; his ass had better sense than he had. Remember it?"

Segovia ignored the quip.

"Ortega is a stupid ass. Those questions he asked—a child wouldn't have been as silly. What did they lead to? Nothing, except that Miss Taylor in half a minute could have grasped the meaning of that dispatch, stolen it, hid it away, and settled back in her chair as cool as a block of ice. In half a minute! It couldn't have been longer."

They were passing under one of the Plaza Mayor arc lights. Jimmy halted.

"Let us see how long half a minute actually seems," he suggested. He had his watch out. "Now!"

Segovia, interested curiously by the test, pored upon the second hand as it traveled its tiny orbit. The movement was preposterously slow.

"Half a minute!" Jimmy proclaimed at last. "Quite some time when you come to count it."

He replaced the watch in his pocket and they walked on. Segovia scowled at the path ahead.

"Do you mean by that to impute——"

Jimmy cut him short.

"Look here, old chap, I'm not imputing anything to anybody. But I want to improve this chance to get something off my chest; and I wouldn't do it, please remember, if I didn't think a whole lot of you. Shall I go on?"

"As you wish."

"All right. I wanted to say it to you this morning, but I couldn't see my way to it then. Now I do see it. Enrique, if I were you I wouldn't get too thick with Miss Mary Taylor."

"That is entirely my affair," Segovia answered. "It can not possibly interest any one but myself."

His tone was coldly forbidding. Jimmy braved it.

"But it interests me," he persisted. "It's because I don't want to see you left in the discard when this big deal we are in on is over. I'll agree with you from the start in everything you can say of Miss Taylor's personal charm. She's handsome as a picture—all that—but when you come down to bald facts what do you or I know of her? Morales is a traitor to his country. I wouldn't believe such a man on his dying oath. Why should I believe him when he says Miss Taylor is, for instance, a distinguished writer?"

"She herself told us she was preparing a series of articles for a magazine. And she told my uncle so today."

"Oh!" said Jimmy. "What is her magazine? Did she say?"

"We didn't get that far. The interview, as you know, was brief."

"Oh!" said Jimmy again. "And she hasn't mentioned it to you, or anything about her work?"

"No. We talked of other things."

"A *rara avis*, by Jove!" exclaimed Jimmy. "People, let me introduce to your attention a modest author. The only one at large."

He laughed, though with a covert scrutiny of his friend. Segovia drew himself up stiffly.

"I think we have pursued the subject far enough," he remarked.

"Only one thing more," Jimmy interjected. "Miss Taylor says she is just arrived from Guatemala. Billy Smith of the United States legation says he saw her in the Canal Zone on Sunday. How do you account for that, *amigo mio?*"

Segovia stumbled in his walk, caught himself, and went on. Jimmy could hear the gasping breath he drew.

"Where, please," he asked with forced calm, "has Mr. Smith seen Miss Taylor in Cortina?"

"He lunched with me today. You passed our window in your car."

"Mr. Smith must have been mistaken," claimed Segovia with a desperate hope.

"He says he'd swear to her in a million," Jimmy told him. "And for myself, I'll add that I don't think she's a born American. She has the lingo down pat, but there's a wee bit of an accent. It's been puzzling me. It may be Swedish, and then again it may be German. I don't know."

"Bosh!" shot out Segovia. "I haven't discovered any such thing. You are letting your imagination run away with you."

They strode on in silence for some time, nearing now the Plaza Central.

"Hang it, old fellow," Jimmy exploded of a sudden, "I know how it is with you, and I'm sorry. But don't you see I couldn't keep mum about this thing? You might let something drop—not meaning to, of course—that would put us in the hole. I had to tell you!"

"It's all right, Jimmy," Enrique said, though he made a little difficulty of it. "We won't talk about it any more now, please."

"Right you are!" acceded Jimmy cheerfully. "And there's the hotel. Come on in and have an anisette frappé. It's the edge of the evening."

"No, I guess not, thank you, if you don't mind. I'll leave you and go home."

He wished to be alone, Jimmy saw. So he said:

"It's good-night, then, old scout. You won't forget about those guns, will you? I've a notion we may need them sooner than we thought."

"It will be attended to," Segovia answered absently.

With this they parted.

THE young Zanhorian proceeded down the Calle Central on his way home. He walked slowly, revolving in his mind the disclosure Jimmy had made to him. Of course Smith was mistaken, yet he cast back a little uneasily to his conversation with Miss Taylor in his car that afternoon. As he recalled it—and with a flush of self-vexation—the talk was largely about himself, his aspirations and future plans; the kind of stuff a sympathetic woman auditor encourages a man to enlarge upon. And, too, she had asked about Jimmy Perry; but there was nothing singular in that. He was her countryman; it was natural that she should show an interest in him.

He recalled further that she had inquired casually if he thought Zanhoria would side with the United States in the war or remain neutral; and if there were not rumors of trouble in the country. She had heard something of the sort in her journeyings before coming to Cortina. Was it true, or just political gossip?

It gratified him now to remember that he had disparaged it, had in fact, conveyed to her the impression that it was ridiculed by the Government. On the other hand, he was unable for the life of him to attach any sinister significance to her question. There were, as every one knew, rumors afloat of trouble with Peralta, and if another had asked his opinion of it he would have seen nothing strange in it. Why, then, mistrust Mary Taylor?

Segovia's thoughts traveled on to the missing Washington dispatch, and a doubt assailed him. The devilish leisureliness of that tiny hand on Jimmy's watch-dial! It could have been done in the time his back was turned if one was skilled enough in such things. But Mary Taylor! No, no, it was inconceivable! And then came a saving thought.

"*Valgame Dios!*" he exclaimed, and struck his fist triumphantly into his hand.

They had only the word of his uncle's secretary that three copies were made. Don Luis had not said that he himself counted them; he was engaged with a visitor at the time. The secretary might have made a mistake. He might have made only two copies or, if three, he might have mislaid one in the mass of papers on his desk. It was possible—probable, in fact. He would take the matter up with his uncle in the morning.

Segovia in these communings had come to the Avenida Alejandrino. He hesitated, and turned into it. The day had been warm. Mary might be out in front enjoying the evening cool. He might, indeed, have a word with her.

As he came to the house he caught sight of spectral forms in the loggia—the ghostly white of sheer lawn dresses. He stopped, hung on his heel, then taking hold of his courage he started up to the door. There was a movement in the loggia, the sound of whispering voices, the scrape of a chair on the floor. A man peered over the balustrade. It was Morales.

"Who comes?" he questioned.

The tone was not altogether friendly. Segovia paused with the feeling that he was an intruder. And yet the hour was not late.

"It is I, Señor Morales—Enrique Segovia," he answered.

For the space of a breath there was no response. One of the white-clad forms dissolved from view. Morales spoke again.

"Señor Segovia? Ah! Oh! This is an unexpected pleasure, señor; a very delightful surprise. One moment, please, and I will be down. I regret to say that the Doña Natalia is not at all well, or we should have you up with us."

"A thousand commiserations, señor, and I beg of you do not disturb yourself," put in Segovia hastily. He had no itch for an exchange of platitudes with the banker. "I was out walking," he continued, "and seeing, as I thought, the ladies in the loggia, I made bold to come in. Please assure the Señora Morales of my very earnest sympathies, and Miss Taylor of my profound regard."

He was turning away when a silvery laugh rippled out to him. It was followed by a delightfully mocking voice.

"And if Miss Taylor should choose to receive the compliment at first-hand, Mr. Segovia? She is not at all indisposed herself. Shall she give you proof of it by coming down?"

"I desire it above all things," said Segovia ardently.

"Wait!" was the command.

There was silence overhead. Miss Taylor, and likewise her host, had gone in. The young man paced the transverse walk by the door in high feather at his good luck.

He was kept waiting some minutes, but at last Miss Taylor came out and stood with him under the stars.

"I have scandalized the dear people in there," she laughed. "They are not American-taught as you are."

Enrique slowly relinquished the hand she had given him.

"It's awfully good of you," he stammered. "I don't deserve it."

"That sounds as if you had been thinking unpleasant things of me," she replied. "But you have been walking; shall we sit down for the small time I have. There is a bench somewhere—ah, here it is. Now, tell me; what are these unpleasant thoughts you've had of me? Tell me!"

The bench was beneath the orange tree under which Juan Lopez had concealed himself on a Sunday night not long before. Miss Taylor, as she urged her question, bent toward her companion trying to read his face in the dim light. Her breath caressed his cheek, intoxicated him.

"I have had no such thoughts," he swore. "How could I? Why, I walked up this way tonight just to be a little nearer to you. I did not dare to hope for this."

Her hand found his, rested on it, pressed it softly. Before she could withdraw it he had snatched it to his lips and covered it with kisses.

"You silly boy," she murmured, "it is only a few hours since we were together." She disengaged her hand gently. "I have been thinking of our call this afternoon, and your uncle. We were horribly in the way—I could see that—yet he was courtesy itself. We shall go again, shall we not, my friend? And those letters; he will give them to me? They will help me so much with my work."

Even in the swirl of his intoxication Enrique was penetrated with a ray of reason. To confound Jimmy forevermore he must resolve to nothingness the doubts cast upon this glorious creature. One was already dissipated; had she purloined the Washington dispatch she could never have spoken with such serene unconcern of her call on Don Luis. And she wished to call again! Presto! That doubt was gone."

"Of course we shall go," he assured her. "I will remind my uncle of the letters. What is the name of your magazine? I don't think you have ever told me."

She appeared surprised.

"Why, haven't I! It's the *North American Gazette* of Philadelphia. A dreadfully dry old thing, but amazingly respectable."

"I can't imagine you writing for it," he exclaimed, joying in another doubt destroyed. "If it was poetry now, or romance—something delicate and beautiful—I could. Do you know that yesterday, when I met you, and learned that you were so traveled, I was really afraid of you at first. Then I tried to think of something touching Guatemala to talk with you about, and I couldn't. I had been to Champerico once—a yachting cruise—and all I could remember of it was the smells! Wasn't it from Champerico you arrived here on Monday?"

"Yes," she said.

He thrilled with the certainty of this last doubt dispelled. His triumph was complete.

"And now—now! You are going to stay with us," he exulted. "We are going to make it so attractive for you here in Cortina that you will not want to leave. You must know my people——"

In full tide she stopped him, lifting her hand to his arm.

"You forget that trouble may come, that there may be other things to think of than pleasuring, my dear friend."

"Trouble!" he echoed. "What trouble?"

"I spoke of it today, and you laughed at me."

"Oh, that!" Wisdom returned and nudged him. "The rumors you have heard? I can not weep over them, though I will try if you bid me."

She touched his arm again, with a certain annoyed impatience now.

"Be serious, please. Your uncle should know. Is he not uneasy at these whisperings? Something surely must have reached him of them?"

"I guess he hears a lot of things. The point is, you see, the revolutionary wolf has barked so often that nobody pays attention to it." He laughed teasingly. "You've got to parade your wolf up to the very door to make us believe he's going to come in."

She did not laugh with him. She leaned his way, speaking earnestly.

"I can't stay longer, but before I go in I want to tell you that I have learned other things since I saw you today—information that may be of value to the State. It is one reason why I came down. I am convinced that your Government is living in a sense of false security. Either that, or it knows more than you are aware of."

He parried this.

"Learned things? How? From whom? You are a stranger here."

"It doesn't matter how it came to me—it came. That is sufficient."

"Oh! May I hope to know what this information is? I'm prickling with curiosity."

His tone seemed to jar upon her.

"You still don't take me seriously, Señor Don Enrique Segovia. So why should I tell you? I think—yes—I will write what I have learned to your superintendent of police. He would know how to prize my information. I will do it!"

She was mocking at him, Segovia felt.

"But I would value it as much," he asserted.

"No. You would only laugh at me again, and we should quarrel."

She rose from the bench.

"Don't go," he implored. "I may have laughed at your fears, but at you—it is an impossibility!"

She shook her head.

"No. I must go. Positively. Señor Morales will be calling to me. And I'm displeased with you. I'm a woman, and you don't talk politics with women. Isn't it so? You think I wouldn't understand. Still, I will tell you something. Listen!" She swayed alluringly toward him. Her lips touched his ear. "You are, after all, a dear boy, and I'm glad to have you for a friend."

She ran away from him into the house.

Segovia walked home on air. All that Mary had said squared with his belief in her. He would let Jimmy know how he had traduced her. As for Smith, he was a plain blind fool!

* * *

JIMMY sat up late that night reading a novel he had begun on the boat, and had forgotten in the rush of events he was plumped into. It was one o'clock when he laid the book down, and sought his bed. Sleep did not come to him. He was thinking of the meeting with the President of Zanhoria, of Kaufman's return, of his appointment with Ortega in the morning, of all the happenings of the day.

It might have been half an hour later when he heard through his transom a faint squeak. It was the door across the hall. Was Mrs. Isaacs coming out or going in? And in either case why was a solitary woman prowling about at this hour of the night?

Jimmy's curiosity, whetted by the half-formed suspicions he entertained, moved him to an act of espionage which under other circumstances he would have scorned. He got up and opened his door cautiously to a crack. He widened it gently and peered out into the dim twilight of the hall. Mrs. Isaacs, in a long kimono, was in the act of passing through the last door on her side of the corridor. There was the flash of an electric torch as she disappeared.

It was a rule with Jimmy to know his whereabouts in a strange hotel in the event of a fire, and he knew that the door Mrs. Isaacs had vanished through gave upon a flight of stairs to the roof. He drew back into his room, mystified and a little frightened.

"Great Heaven!" he ejaculated. "Are we going to have a suicide? Is she going to jump off into the street?"

He thought of giving an alarm, and thought better of it. If the woman wanted to kill herself there were a dozen less terrible ways than that. Perhaps she was going up for the air; perhaps she wanted a view of the city by night; perhaps . . . .

"Oh, blast it," he scolded himself, "a woman is apt to do any fool thing that comes into her head. If she wanted to die there was the whole Caribbean Sea she crossed. Lots of water, and no fuss or muss."

He went back to bed. How long he lay staring up at the shadowy ceiling he could not have told, but after a time two strokes of the great bell in the Church of Our Lady of Charity pealed on the night. The echo had scarcely died away when the slightest of sounds came to Jimmy from the end of the hall. A moment or two later the door opposite squeaked. Mrs. Isaacs had returned to her room.

"Keeping me awake like this!" Jimmy grumbled. "What the devil was she doing up there all this time, I'd like to know? Looking for that lost relative perhaps. Huh!"

He turned on his side, and with the question still begging an answer grumbled himbled himself off to sleep.

CHAPTER XIV

WITH THE SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE

IN THE morning before going down to breakfast Jimmy climbed the stairs to the roof. It was sheer inquisitiveness that impelled him. He hoped to find some evidence of Mrs. Isaacs' visit to the spot.

He looked about him. With the exception of odds and ends of old newspapers the street tourbillions had sent wheeling up through many weeks there was nothing on the roof to excite comment. He walked to the north parapet and looked over. The Plaza Central was spread out before him. Beyond, in the distance, were the Government buildings and the president's mansion. Between these and the business section of the city was a checkered map of many-tinted dwellings.

Jimmy's gaze returned to the square at his feet. An automobile was stopping before the Banco Nacional. He recognized Morales alighting from it. And that was Miss Taylor with him; Jimmy could not mistake that erect, elegant figure.

"A busy day for you Señor Renegado," he muttered. "I wonder how you will get that dispatch to Kaufman? You can't telephone him for fear of somebody listening in. You can't take it yourself, and I don't think you'd risk trusting it to the mails—not now. A messenger, perhaps. But not Miss Taylor; that wouldn't do at all."

The car drove off. It drew up at the post-office on the east side of the square, and Miss Taylor got out and went in. Jimmy grinned derisively.

"Sending a story home to her magazine, maybe. Interview with the secretary of state. Great stuff!"

He was turning away when in the direction of the Calle Comercio he saw a thing that arrested him. It was the Imperial German standard fluttering up to the peak of its tall staff. He could see the man at the halyards. La Caridad was striking the hour.

"Nine o'clock. They are on the job early there," Jimmy soliloquized. "We don't take down our shutters, Billy said, until ten. They are always on the job, these Germans."

The little frowning knot popped out between his eyes as he stood surveying the flag. His thoughts returned to Mrs. Isaacs.

"I wonder if that had anything to do with her trip up here? I wonder if she signaled——"

He broke off with a curt laugh at himself. It was black night when Mrs. Isaacs made her visit to the roof.

Jimmy suddenly crouched down behind the parapet. His eyes had lighted on a small figure in gray crossing the plaza from the east. It was Mrs. Isaacs. He watched her from his hiding-place. She was at the bandstand now. Here she stopped, lingered a moment, and went on, but with a sharp turn to the north. It would bring her out at a point directly in face of the Banco Nacional.

"Hello!" Jimmy exclaimed. "She is going there."

Even as he voiced his surprise Mrs. Isaacs crossed the street and entered the bank. Jimmy again mocked at himself.

"What of it? What did I go there for? What do hundreds, thousands of people go there for? Bah! I'm making mountains of molehills. To the deuce with Mrs. Isaacs! I'm going to get some breakfast."

On the point of leaving he cast another glance at the post-office. The Morales car was gone. He swept the four sides of the square for a sight of it, but in vain. Whereupon he retraced his steps to the hatch. Before going in he looked off to the south where the piled-up mountains drew a blurred blue wave-line across the sky.

That highest peak must be Borazo, the sleeping volcano, from the top of which Winifred Brewer had said the Pacific could be seen. He could vision the girl as she had stood beside him in the bungalow outside the old stone house. It was a picture he had summoned up more than once in the past twenty-four hours, and each time from a new angle of discovered charm.

He went down the stairs, and to his delayed breakfast. Subsequently he loitered about the lobby impatient for Enrique to arrive and tell him that the guns were ready. He would start for the hacienda immediately after keeping his appointment with Ortega at eleven. It was past ten now.

A young man came in from the street, and spoke to the clerk. Jimmy, happening to look that way, saw the amiable Mr. Gomez pointing him out. The young man came over to where he was standing, bowed low, and tendered him an envelope monogramed in gold.

"Tengo el honor de presentarle una carta del Señor Don Manuel Morales," he said, and bowed himself away.

Jimmy thought of calling him back, but reflected that were an answer desired the messenger would have waited. He found a chair, sat down, took out his penknife, and slit open the envelope. Whatever Señor Morales' proficiency in oral English, he evidently was not sure of himself with the written word. The note was in Spanish. Jimmy made rather heavy weather of it, but finally mastered the contents. Stripped of a maze of flowery superlatives and reduced to bald terms, he was informed that Señora Morales was seriously ill, and the dinner invitation was recalled.

"That dispatch, of course," he speculated. "This is what Ortega expected." His mouth widened humorously. "I've got to eat four bananas, and I hate the sight of the darned things."

He sat on, hoping for Segovia's appearance. Was there any hitch about the guns? No, there couldn't be; he had the Government's secret sanction at his back. What the dickens could be keeping him, then?

At ten minutes of eleven Jimmy abandoned hope of Segovia's coming. He went to the desk and asked for a sheet of paper.

"You will find me with E. O. after eleven," he wrote.

He sealed the note, and charged the clerk to give it into Segovia's hands if he looked in. Then he set out to keep his engagement with Ortega.

THE TURNED south from the plaza into the Calle Central, walked two squares, and came to a long, rambling structure pierced with an archway that led into a great paved quadrangle. At the farther end yawned the mouth of the municipal prison. Around the quadrangle doors opened into various administrative departments—the lower courts of law, mayor's office, city police, and what not. Also here was to be found the office of the State superintendent of police. The position was, in effect, a cabinet one, though it was not so dignified in the Zanhorian constitution.

Jimmy passed in under the arch. He knew his way thus far, for it was here he had come on Monday night with Enrique. A man whom he accosted conducted him to a door to the left and into a waiting-room. Here his name was taken in to an adjoining room, and almost instantly thereafter he was ushered into this sancum. The superintendent was standing at his desk to greet him. They shook hands.

"I should have told you," Ortega said, "of my private entrance from the street—that." He indicated a door at his back. "It would have relieved you of this trouble."

"I'm afraid I've kept you waiting," Jimmy apologized. "I was hoping to see Enrique Segovia, and hung on till the last minute. Those guns, you know."

Ortega placed a chair for him, and resumed his seat.

"Did not Señor Segovia mention it to you?" he asked. "I arranged with him about it last night at supper. The guns went out early this morning in a cart—four Mausers and as many Colts. My man was instructed to say that they were from you."

"Oh," said Jimmy.

He was disappointed.

Ortega gave him an exploring glance. Jimmy felt his face grow red under it.

"I expected to take them myself," he murmured. "It's all right, of course." He summoned a laugh and remarked: "I reckon you'd better send out for some bananas. I'm due to eat a few."

"Yes?"

"Yes. If my head wasn't stuffed with wool I would have known that Morales would have other things to do tonight than to give a dinner-party."

Ortega idly scanned the note Jimmy passed to him, and laid it down. Since he was acquainted with the essence of it the manner did not concern him.

"I imagined you would hear from him," was his only comment.

"I say, Señor Superintendent," exclaimed Jimmy as a sudden thought visited him. "What if those two held a meeting last night? They can't let the grass grow under them now."

The other shook his head.

"If Morales knew of Kaufman's return, and that is not certain, he would have had difficulty in seeing him. His excellency arrived three hours late. An accident. The locomotive blew out a cylinder head after leaving Yoro. Kaufman went directly to his house in the Calle Rosario, and to bed, I judge, for he did not come out. At Morales' house there was but one caller last night—our afflicted young friend, Don Enrique Segovia."

Jimmy bounced in his chair.

"The deuce! When he left me he said he was going to bed."

The superintendent was silent for an appreciable time. He was leaning back gazing at a picture on the wall over the desk. Jimmy wondered what was coming. At last Ortega spoke.

"Sometimes, when a man receives a hard blow—on his head, let us put it—he loses his sense of perspective for a period. Then, if he is fortunate, he gets another blow on the same spot, and is himself again. In the interim he's a trial to his friends."

"I know who you have in mind," said Jimmy bluntly. "But I think I gave him an eye-opener last night."

He told of his talk with Enrique, of Billy Smith's positive identification of Mary Taylor, and of his own conclusions regarding her.

"And it seems," appended Ortega quietly, "that Don Enrique could not sleep until he had seen the lady, and assured himself of her unblemished innocence. Let us pray that his frenzy did not whip his tongue to say things that we shall all regret."

"Great grief!" cried Jimmy aghast. "He wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"He is in love," commented the official dryly. "I think we will look for another driver for your car tonight."

"I have him," submitted Jimmy promptly. "Billy Smith of the American legation; and he speaks German."

Ortega was interested.

"You can be sure of him?" he inquired.

"I'd trust that kid to Hades and back," declared Jimmy. "I'll have him on hand when you say. So it is to be tonight?"

He leaned forward eagerly.

"Yes. Morales' note was the one proof I needed. Kaufman will meet with him at his house tonight, at the usual hour, I assume." He smiled. "Our good friend Juan Lopez has been of service there."

"Lopez?" Jimmy was puzzled.

"I let him go home this morning," continued Ortega, "and it happened that shortly afterward there was trouble with the lighting system in Señor Morales' house. Marica, Juan's woman, discovered it. There is a cellar in which the kitchen stores are kept. It is dark. Marica found that the lights would not burn. Investigation proved that the entire house system was affected. The power company sent a man to make repairs; and we shall have installed presently a detectaphone under the sideboard in the dining-room——"

"With the other end in the cellar," cut in Jimmy, his eyes aglow. "I get you, Don Emilio. But if they don't use the dining-room? What then?"

Ortega spread out his palms.

"It is a chance. But Lopez says they have used it heretofore. He has seen a thread of light under the windows on those other nights.

"I suppose," advanced Jimmy diffidently, "there's no danger of this fellow Lopez giving you the double-cross?"

"Giving me the what?"

Don Emilio's English, comprehensive though it was, failed him here.

"Go back on you; turn traitor," Jimmy explained.

"He won't," said the other with cold emphasis. "We have an understanding; and he will answer for Marica."

IT OCCURRED here to Jimmy that it might be well to confide in Don Emilio his suspicions of Mrs. Rebecca Isaacs. He did so. The superintendent listened with tranquil composure. He said, when Jimmy was through:

"If we are right about Miss Taylor it would seem to preclude suspicion of this Mrs. Isaacs. Two German intelligence people—and both women—working in one small city is hardly probable. I won't say it is impossible—the term is obsolete—but it is uneconomic, a crime in German eyes. The woman's mission may very well be exactly as she has stated it."

"But the visit to the roof—at two in the morning!" argued Jimmy unconvinced. "That is what stops me."

"If I had time I could evolve a dozen reasons for it," returned the other. His gray eyes twinkled. "When you have lived to my age you will know that the thing you least expect a woman to do is precisely the thing she is most likely to do. But we are straying from our objective. I will ask you and Mr. Smith to stay close to your hotel after nine tonight. Keep to your room; I shall know then exactly where to find you. You will be sent for when the time is at hand. My special reason for asking you to come to me this morning has been satisfied—the word from Morales. Have you a pistol?"

"I pack one in my grip," answered Jimmy. "I wish," he added, "I could have a look at Kaufman to size up his man-power. Don't you think it likely that he'll show himself today at the International? Just to make people think there's nothing in the wind? I can get Mr. Lane to take me there to lunch."

Ortega nodded.

"I think it is likely, Mr. Perry, unless——"

"Oh, I say, Don Emilio! Just call me Jimmy. I'll be proud to have you. You're a man's man, sir. It's good to know you."

The superintendent acknowledged this gravely. Under the surface he was immensely pleased, for he liked this young American.

"To me the honor, Jimmy. Yes, unless he has a better reason, I think it is likely that Herr Kaufman will show himself at the club today."

"His last appearance," grinned Jimmy.

A little scraping sound caused him to look toward the outer door. He noticed that there was a steel box attached to it.

"The post," said Ortega. He got up, fitted a key to the box, and took out a letter. He returned to his desk, and studied the superscription a moment. With an excusatory gesture he opened the missive. The news it conveyed was sensational but his face gave no indication of it. He looked up at Jimmy.

"I will read you this," he said. "It was mailed this morning, by the postmark. Spanish, and unsigned. Hand disguised, I should say."

He translated the note:

> There is a secret wireless plant at the German legation. Watch the flagstaff after midnight.

"Mrs. Isaacs!" popped out Jimmy.

But immediately his countenance fell. The warning did not fit in with his theory of the woman; for in spite of Ortega he believed she was a German spy.

The superintendent stroked his chin softly. He was deeply interested in this intelligence he had received. It was only since Juan Lopez's revelation that he had seriously connected Kaufman with the plot against the State. He had not, in the interim, turned his thoughts to the German legation; they were with Kaufman at Arraca.

"Ah," he murmured, "I am beginning to understand. They have a wireless at the lumber camp. And the yacht mentioned in the Washington dispatch has one—of course."

"If it was not Mrs. Isaacs who, do you think, sent the note?" Jimmy asked. "Some resident of Cortina who has stumbled on the secret?"

"I am not thinking of the sender, my good friend," replied Ortega. "It is the verification of this advice that I am concerned with. Afterward——"

Some one tapped on the street door. Ortega quit the desk, and consulted a window mirror artfully placed to reflect through the jalousie any one who stood without.

"It is Enrique Segovia," he announced.

"I left a line for him saying he could find me here," Jimmy told him.

Ortega shrugged resignedly.

"In that case——"

He did not finish, but opened the door.

Segovia strode in. His face was flushed, and his eyes were clouded with an expression that was anger, irritation, despair and sullen defiance welded into a gloomy whole.

CHAPTER XV

MAKING READY

SEGOVIA exploded into rapid-fire Spanish the moment the door was closed; it was a natural reversion to his native tongue in an hour of stress. But he caught sight of Jimmy's bewildered face, and changed to English.

"I am just from my uncle," he said savagely. "We have had words—a quarrel. He will not believe. But stay! I must tell you what went before."

He did not go on right away, but walked nervously about the room, ignoring the seat Ortega indicated to him. The superintendent said nothing, and waited. Segovia suddenly stopped in front of Jimmy's chair.

"You have told Don Emilio of our talk last night?" he taxed.

"Briefly, yes," Jimmy answered steadily. "I thought that he should know."

He expected an outbreak of reproaches. To his surprise Segovia received the avowal with an appearance of relief.

"That makes it easier," he said, and went on without pause. "I did not go home when I left you. Instead I called on Miss Taylor, and—" his voice rose to a pitch of triumph—"and I learned from her lips that all these imputations that have been brought against her are absolutely without foundation."

Jimmy stared at him, unbelieving of his own ears. The fellow had indeed gone stark mad. Ortega made no sound.

"I did not see my uncle at breakfast," Segovia proceeded. "I overslept. But I went to his office. He acknowledged to me that he did not count the copies of that dispatch when they were laid on his desk—he did not have the opportunity. But the secretary claims that he made three copies. He swears that he did. And on this one man's word alone rests the charge against a woman's honor. I say that he is grossly in error or that he lies! He may be getting German money. How do you know that he isn't?"

Jimmy threw a startled look in the superintendent's direction. Here was a possibility they had not reckoned with. The man at the desk held his imperturbable pose. He knew Valera's secretary. Jimmy turned to Segovia. He was continuing his story, the angry blood boiling in his face.

"I submitted to Don Luis the facts I had learned. He met them with total incredulity, with insulting doubts of my sanity, with aspersions on Miss Taylor's character that were monstrous after what she had told me. He——"

Jimmy caught him up with a burst of exasperation in which alarm for their cause was mingled.

"In God's name, man, what did she tell you?" he shouted.

"What?" shouted back Segovia. "That she wanted to call on Señor Valera again, at once, if possible, to talk with him about her work. Would that be the desire of a thief? Oh, I can see what you two are thinking—that I played the fool—that I brought up these charges, one by one, and asked her to explain. Well, I did nothing of the sort. I did not give her the fraction of a hint that she was suspected. We talked of many things, and my questions were slipped in here and there—naturally—as well as Don Emilio could have done it. I wanted the truth—do you understand? I had to have it, for if she had been deceiving me all along, I——"

His utterance choked and ceased. All the latent turbulency of the man's nature was revealed in this one flashing instant. Jimmy sought to restore him to himself.

"Go on," he said, in a cool, even voice. "How about that magazine—the name of it?"

"Ah!" Segovia exhaled noisily. "It is the *North American Gazette*, published in Philadelphia. An old-established periodical of the highest order." He laughed bitterly. "My uncle desires to see her credentials—a lady's word is not sufficient. I shall be asked next to make her prove that she arrived here on Monday from Champerico."

"She told you that—that she came from Champerico?"

"She did!"

"Go on," said Jimmy sententiously.

"What else is there to say?" retorted Segovia. "I have proved my points. Smith was mistaken—all of you mistaken. You have traduced a perfectly irreproachable girl, defenseless except for me."

Neither Jimmy nor Ortega spoke. Segovia had resumed his caged pacing of the room.

"There is another thing," he broke out. "Miss Taylor has heard these revolution rumors that are afloat. She mentioned it yesterday while we were out driving."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Jimmy.

"I made light of them—denied them," Segovia shot out fiercely. "Do you think I am a fool! She knows nothing of this Kaufman business. She knows only what everybody knows. You may form a different opinion of Miss Taylor after this dinner tonight——"

"The invitation is withdrawn," put in Jimmy. "Read this. You will find its counterpart, no doubt, waiting for you at your house."

Segovia read Morales' note. Chagrin was written on his face.

"The Doña Natalia was ill when I was there last night," he muttered.

"In preparation for this of today," observed Jimmy ironically. "Miss Taylor never expected to see you tonight. Kaufman will be there."

Segovia swore a wicked Spanish oath.

"Enough!" he cried. "I will hear no more against her. Ha!"

He thought he saw his way to overwhelming them with the convincing proof of their blind stupidity. He came over to where Ortega sat.

"Miss Taylor told me last night that information had reached her of value to the State. She refused to tell me what it was, but said she would communicate it to the superintendent of police. If she does this, Don Emilio, what shall you have to say then? Shall you," he sneered, "regard it as an enemy act?"

"By George, sir," gasped Jimmy at Ortega. "That note you just got! I saw her go into the post-office——"

He checked himself at a slight movement from the superintendent, but too late. Segovia pounced upon his words.

"Ah! You have heard from her, Señor Ortega! Now will you believe?"

Ortega turned to Jimmy.

"When?" he asked.

"While I was on the roof. It was striking nine."

ORTEGA examined again the postmark of the envelope on his desk. The hour was 9:30 A.M. As he knew, this was the time they began to make up the mail for the second city delivery.

"Well, am I not to see what Miss Taylor wrote?" demanded Segovia. "If others have seen it I presume I may."

Don Emilio quietly handed him the note.

"Why, it is not signed!" he exclaimed.

"As you see, Don Enrique. Yet perhaps you are acquainted with the lady's writing. Yes?"

"No," confessed Segovia, "I am not acquainted with it."

"Then there is no certainty that it is from Miss Taylor, this information."

"But she said it was of value to the State. And this is! One can hardly call it a coincidence," argued Segovia. "I shall find out. I shall ask her."

Ortega put his hand out and touched the fiery young fellow's arm. There was something placating, something paternal in the gesture.

"Tomorrow, my boy," he said. "We will call judgment suspended until then. I am willing to make all amends if I have suspected the lady unjustly; but today—tonight—I have work laid out for you, Enrique. I have selected you to put this radio plant out of business. Kaufman's people must not send that dispatch abroad tonight."

Jimmy admired the simple ease with which the police head was disposing of a difficulty.

"But—if you are right—if Kaufman does go to Morales'—I am to drive the car for Jimmy," protested Segovia.

"I have arranged for that," Ortega told him. "This that I have for you to do is vastly more important. It requires proved courage. You are the man for it. My choice."

Segovia was almost normal again, and he was flattered by the superintendent's estimate of him.

"What am I to do?" he asked.

"'Watch the flagstaff,'" Ortega quoted from the note. "That can mean but one thing: they raise a wireless antenna on it some time after midnight. The sending apparatus is in the cellar, of course, and you can't get at it; but you can disable the antenna. You will be stationed on the adjacent roof. Some one, it is natural to imagine, will be on guard on the legation roof. You are to overpower that man, and cut the wire."

Segovia's eyes had kindled as he listened. Mary Taylor receded into the background of his thoughts, and a healthy reaction followed; it was the stimulus of adventure flowing in his veins. He spoke with alacrity.

"I'll do better than that. I'll cut down the flagpole." He laughed now. "They may complain to the police tomorrow, Don Emilio. It's an invasion of extra-territorial rights."

"They can not complain. They are operating a secret wireless in contravention of the public law," returned the superintendent. "You will report to me here, please, at half-past ten tonight for instructions."

Jimmy felt that the interview, so far as he was concerned, was at an end. It was nearly twelve, and he remembered that the negro Sam, Brewer's chauffeur, would be at the post-office at twelve. He would send a word to Winifred by Sam.

"I think I will be going, Don Emilio," he said. "I have taken up enough of your time."

"And I; I will be going too, unless you have something more to say to me," Segovia added.

Ortega rose.

"Nothing more this morning. Just keep alive until tonight," he smiled. "Go out the way you came, Jimmy, if you please.

It will excite less remark than if you both leave by the same door, should any one be passing."

As Jimmy, a few minutes later, issued from the archway into the Calle Central he looked about for Enrique. He glimpsed him going down the street away from the plaza. Jimmy drew a breath of relief. He had felt, there in Ortega's office, a sense of constraint with Enrique, and that the feeling was mutual Enrique's present action evinced. He had not waited for him. Jimmy was sorry that this cloud had arisen between them, for he liked the young Zanhorian whole-heartedly.

"Oh, well, it won't last," he reflected. "When Enrique gets over this Mary Taylor fever he'll be worth while again." His brow wrinkled as another view of the situation obtruded itself. "Suppose, after all, he should be right about her—where would I get off? At the wrong stop, by Jove! Confound women anyway!"

With this sage conclusion he hurried on to send a message to Winifred. It had been his intention to drop into the hotel and scribble a few lines advising her that the attempt was for this night, but he abandoned it. The noon hour was booming out, and he was afraid that Sam might not wait the prescribed fifteen minutes.

He came to the square and cut across it to the post-office. Sam was already on hand, and Jimmy noted with approval that he had placed his car some little way down from the office, before a house-renting agency, he gathered from the sign in the window. Jimmy felt that he would not be quite such a conspicuous target for the curious eyes of those going in and out of the public building when he spoke to Sam. It would be but a word, for he knew from much experience with negroes their inability to "carry straight" a verbal message.

Jimmy lounged indifferently up to the car. He saw that the tonneau was piled with packages and boxes, things to eat, he surmised. The delivery of the guns had, perhaps, prompted Brewer to lay in stores against possible eventualities. Within touch of Sam's elbow Jimmy stopped, and maneuvered to light a cigaret. He spoke to the man under his breath.

"Sam, I am Mr. James Perry. Sit still!"

"Yessuh."

The black remained quiescent as a block of ebony. Jimmy continued.

"Say to Miss Winifred this: 'Look for me late tonight.'"

"'Look for me late tonight,'" repeated Sam.

"Good! You have earned five dollars," Jimmy said, and walked on drawing on his cigaret.

Something—the nudging of a sixth sense, it might have been—impelled him to glance behind him. Sam was starting off. Standing in the door of the renting-agency was Mrs. Isaacs. The machine moved away, and she came on. Jimmy hastily turned to front again.

"Where did she spring from?" he asked himself irritably. "It will be getting so pretty soon that I'll be seeing her in my sleep. I wonder if she caught on to it that I was talking with Sam? I wonder—great guns!—if she was taking in the number of the car?" He laughed shortly. "Oh, bosh! I'm a regular old maid. I'll be looking under the bed for burglars next."

Nevertheless, he did not go directly up the Calle Commercio to his legation, as he had intended, but stopped in at a tobacco shop on the corner. Here he spent ten minutes selecting a box of cigars. It helped him to dodge Mrs. Isaacs, and besides he would want something to smoke at the hacienda.

* * *

JIMMY received a distinct shock as he approached the legation. Morales' car stood in front of it, and the Hon. John Henry Lane, bareheaded, was escorting out to it no other than Miss Mary Taylor. Jimmy was still some distance down the street, and he slipped into a doorway to recover from this midriff thrust at his suspicions of the girl.

"I'll be shot if this don't get my goat!" he inelegantly remarked.

He heard presently the grunt of the mechanism as the clutch was let in, and he recollected that the car was pointed his way. As he was not of a mind to be detected skulking in a doorway he stepped forth, and proceeded leisurely up the street.

Miss Taylor's quick eye singled him out. She spoke to her driver and the car slid up to the walk precisely at the point that would intercept Jimmy.

"How do you do, Mr. Perry?" she called out to him.

He paused, apparently surprised and delighted.

"Why, how do you do?" he returned. "I'm beginning to believe that I was born to good luck. This is the second time I have had the happiness of seeing you today."

She widened her wonderful eyes at him. "Indeed! And the first time?"

"You were going into the post-office."

"And you wouldn't stop and speak?"

"Oh, I was too far off. And I was late for my breakfast."

"That," she said with a radiant smile, "is the cleverest excuse you could offer. It is so entirely satisfying. If I had robbed you of your breakfast what would you have thought when you learned that I was also to deny you your dinner—or that Señor Morales was? *Viene á ser lo mismo.* You have his apologies—yes? Poor Doña Natalia! She is really wretchedly indisposed."

"Please convey to her my sympathy, and to Señor Morales," Jimmy entreated with becoming concern. "For myself I have lost beyond recall a pleasure that Señor Morales kindly intimated was simply deferred. I am leaving Cortina very shortly."

Her face expressed polite regret.

"You are going away for good?"

"Or ill—one never knows."

"You mean that you are going home to fight the Germans, I suppose."

"Eventually, if not now. Just at this moment I am on my way to a luncheon appointment with the American minister." He grinned. "At least I am reasonably sure of that one meal. I have it here."

He touched the package under his arm.

She laughed in real amusement.

"Mr. Lane!" she exclaimed. "I am just from him. I came down on some errands Doña Natalia forgot to mention to me this morning. We chanced to pass through this street, and I saw the flag—Old Glory!" She clasped her hands as might a saint at prayer. "I just had to go in and register. And Mr. Lane! Such a charming man. So—so—" her eyes were ecstatic—"beautifully impressed with the responsibilities of his eminent post. I adore him!"

Hang it, she's making fun of him, thought Jimmy. I'll risk a shot at her. He said:

"You found the key to his weak spot, I perceive; yet really Lane isn't such an ass as he seems—he can see through a millstone with a hole in it as well as the next one, especially if there's a pretty woman at the far end. But I'm keeping you." He held out his hand. "Enrique has told me of his call on you last night." He imagined he felt her fingers flex slightly. "Poor chap! You have bewitched him, and he doesn't know it. Or might it be proper to say 'lucky chap' of one who is under a spell?" He laughed good-naturedly, and rattled on. "I won't say good-by; it's bad medicine. I'll say—how is it in German—*auf wiedersehn?* Anyway, I mean I shall exist only in the hope of seeing you again."

She bit her lip, for he had bowed and moved away before she could frame an adequate rejoinder. She bade the driver go on, and leaned back with a delicate frown penciled between her sea-blue eyes.

The car was turning into the Calle Grande on the north side of the plaza when the driver brought it to a stop at an earnest signal from a little woman in gray who was standing just around the corner.

"What is it, Gaspar?" inquired Miss Taylor.

The driver's answer was forestalled by the appearance of the little woman at the door of the machine.

"How do you do, Miss Taylor?" she smiled. In a quick undertone she added something that caused Miss Taylor to accept the extended hand. To passers-by here were two friends pleasantly met. Gaspar at the wheel cocked his ear hoping to hear what was said, but the voices were pitched too low for him, and in a language he did not understand.

The two talked in rapid, questioning sentences for a brief period. Then followed another exchange of handshakes, and Mrs. Isaacs stepped down from the running-board. At a word from Miss Taylor the car continued on its way. Her face was thoughtful.

Mrs. Isaacs crossed over to the renting-agency below the post-office. In ten minutes she was out again on the street. She waved back the man who had accompanied her to the door. He expostulated, deference in all his manner, but her negation was positive, and with a shrug and a bow he returned inside. These Americans! One knew not what to expect of them. They would walk in the heat of the day to inspect a residence when an automobile was at their disposal. *Madre de Dios!*

Mrs. Isaacs walked sedately south on the Calle Commercio until she came to the

Calle Dolores, a dozen blocks from the plaza. She turned west on this, and began to scrutinize the houses closely. They were detached, each in its own plat of ground. Finally she paused at No. 140, drew a key from her pocket and let herself in. It was the furnished house Walter Brewer had so hurriedly departed from on Tuesday morning.

It would appear that Mrs. Isaacs' search for her lost relative was taking on curious angles of endeavor.

CHAPTER XVI

IN AID OF THE CAUSE

BILLY SMITH looked up with a broad grin when Jimmy entered the legation.

"Got news for you, sport," he cried.

"No, you haven't," Jimmy countered. "I've been speaking with her down the street. Saw her coming out of here."

"It's my Panama pet," declared Billy emphatically. "If it isn't it's her twin sister. Gee, his nibs fell for her hard. Listen! You can hear the echo yet."

"Shut up!" Jimmy barked at him. "Bring out the visitors' book. I want a peek at it."

"She's in it all right," Billy assured him. "Miss Mary W. Taylor, Minneapolis, Minnesota. I guided her dear little hand. Oh, boy! Ain't she a dream! The kind they rob the banks for."

While he was chattering his nonsense Billy had produced the register. Jimmy studied the entry.

"Darn it all," he mumbled, "I wish I had that note. This looks something like it—the 'W' in 'Watch the flagstaff.' But Ortega said the writing was disguised. I'm up a stump."

He banged the book shut, impatiently.

"What's the excitement?" inquired Billy, who was scanning him expectantly.

"Got an American newspaper directory in the archives of this mausoleum?" demanded Jimmy.

"An old one."

"Get it out—not now, but while I'm in with Lane—and see if there's a magazine published in Philadelphia called the *North American Gazette*."

"What the——"

"And say, sonny, you ought to be home in bed. You've got a fever coming on. Your eyes are not right. I'll mention it to Lane. A complete rest is what you need. Three days; longer maybe."

"Aha!" Billy's nose twitched violently. "You haven't forgotten your promise. You are going to let me help?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Tonight. Do you know the Fernandez hacienda on the Santa Marta Road?"

"Like the way to dinner. Been by it a million times."

"All right. Get some sleep and come to the hotel at nine sharp—my room. Wear a cap. Do you own a pistol?"

"You bet. An automatic."

Billy's voice changed to a feeble moan, and he dropped limply into a chair. He had heard a hand on the door of the next room. It was Mr. Whittaker, the secretary, coming in.

"Smith," he began morosely, but at sight of Jimmy he broke into glad acclaim. "It's Mr. Perry! How are you, sir? You have called to see the minister? He will be delighted." He turned irritably on Billy. "In Heaven's name, Smith, what has overtaken you? What are you making those horrid sounds for?"

"He's not well," put in Jimmy. "I remarked it when I came in. A touch of fever, I should say."

Mr. Whittaker gazed through his spectacles in acute astonishment at his assistant. Not twenty minutes before, in the presence of the departing Miss Taylor, he had been as vivacious as a monkey.

"I'm feeling awful bad," whimpered Billy. "It struck me all of a sudden."

"Go home and to bed, young fellow. Call a doctor." Jimmy gave Whittaker a friendly tap on the shoulder. "You ought to let him have a few days off. An ounce of prevention—what?"

The pale-faced secretary tingled with pleasure at the plutocratic touch.

"Certainly, Smith, certainly," he sparkled. "Stay till Monday. I'll look after your end. Don't worry. Shall we go in to the minister, Mr. Perry?"

Billy, cautiously recovering, stared at the door that closed on them.

"Huh, talk about love making the world go 'round," he gibed. "It's grease! The kind Jimmy's got in barrelfuls. I wish I was good and plenty smeared with it."

He left his chair, and hurriedly consulted the newspaper directory. He did not want

Whittaker to come back and question him. He made a mental note of his finding, grabbed for his hat, and scampered to the door. He pulled up as he reached it.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "I forgot to tell Jimmy that Mrs. Ikey was here this morning, and slipped away without registering. He'll get it first from the old man now."

He went out grumbling at himself for overlooking this extra morsel of legation news.

Jimmy found the portly envoy in excellent spirits. Good humor played upon his brow, and peeped from his eye.

"Ah, James, my dear boy, how are you today?" he caroled. "I was rather expecting you to drop in and talk over the procedure of last night. A little sooner, James, and I could have given you a surprise."

He rubbed his hands and wagged his head with ponderous cunning.

"A surprise?" said Jimmy innocently. "What, sir?"

"A lady, my boy. One in whom we are all deeply interested."

"Not Miss Taylor?"

"Herself, James. And, egad, sir, I can't bring myself to blame Señor Segovia for his flair in that direction. A beautiful woman! Captivating! As grateful to the eye as a—ah—ahumph—young gazelle."

"Great Scott! He certainly did fall for her!" ejaculated Jimmy inwardly. Aloud he said: "You have surprised me, sir. This, I would have imagined, is the last place Miss Taylor would have ventured in."

"A remarkable woman, James. It was a treat to visit with her," gabbled Lane. "It removed the last doubt I entertained of her. Would a person who had stolen a State secret come to the—er—ahumph—nest, so to speak, in which it was hatched? No, certainly not. Would the accredited correspondent of the—what's the magazine?"

"Philadelphia *North American Gazette*, she says."

"Oh, yes, to be sure." Lane scribbled on a pad before him. "I know it. Would the correspondent of that pre-eminent periodical be guilty of—ah—latrociny, shall we call it? Most assuredly not!"

Jimmy stared at him. First Enrique, now Lane! Could it really be that he was in the wrong? And Ortega—was he, too, as badly misled? As he thought back on it Ortega had seemed to waver in the last few minutes of his talk with Enrique this morning.

"Look here, Mr. Lane," he blurted out, "I'm beginning to think that dispatch wasn't stolen at all. There's a mistake somewhere. Enrique Segovia claims that it lies with Señor Valera's secretary. There is no one else to lay it to, if we eliminate Miss Taylor, unless, of course, it happened that Señor Valera chewed the paper up and swallowed it in a fit of absent-mindedness."

He laughed, but without mirth.

Lane was silent. He was leaning back and twiddling his thumbs, and smiling, so it seemed to Jimmy, at his own senile imaginings of his late fair visitor.

"I say, Mr. Lane," he persevered, "Morales has recalled his dinner invitation. Señor Ortega says it means that Kaufman is going there tonight, and it's my chance to get him. But if the dispatch was not stolen what reason have we to believe that there will be a meeting tonight instead of Sunday? The situation is beyond me."

Lane, still smiling, tapped his temple with a long white finger, and spoke. His answer was so astonishingly at variance with the question asked that Jimmy gaped at him.

"She has brains, sir, as well as beauty. It is why she came—the act of unconscious innocence walking on the edge of the mine without fear of harm. No one but a beautiful woman with brains would dare the thing that might destroy her."

Jimmy was sensible of the contradiction of the minister's words, and a variety of expressions succeeded one another on his face. But he said nothing. Lane was not through, he saw.

"I ENJOYED it immensely, her call," Lane continued. "I am still enjoying it. She approached me on my blind side—oh, it was rarely done, as sweetly as a child at play with its doll! I am letting you see, James, as I have no doubt you have already seen, that John Henry Lane is a poor fool for vanity, and delights in incense burned at his feet of clay. It is only in a moment such as this that I will confess my weakness—when I have been properly made aware of it. 'Oh why should the spirit of mortal be proud,' when teetoodledum, teetoodledow—or however it goes. Perhaps you can supply it, James. But no matter; I did, Heaven help me, bathe in that lovely creature's homage—and she went away in the moral certainty that I had not the remotest suspicion of her object in coming."

The Hon. John Henry sat up in his chair and chuckled at the sport he had been having with his young friend. Jimmy heaved a huge sigh of restored confidence in his own judgment.

"You had me going, sir. I didn't know where you were coming out," he acknowledged with a grin. "Then you do believe that Miss Taylor stole the paper?"

"Did I not say that her call removed the last doubt?" replied the minister, his eyes twinkling. He turned serious. "James, it has helped our—er—your plans, if I'm not in error. The woman thinks now that the copy has not been missed, and they will proceed in this assurance. You can depend on it that Herr Kaufman has the dispatch in his possession, and will act quickly. In fact, I can say——"

Jimmy waited for him to go on, but Lane seemed to have become absorbed in a search for his box of cigars. It was not in the usual drawer. He found it shortly.

"Help yourself, James," he invited. "I need something for my nerves after what I have been through this morning."

His eyes were twinkling again.

"By the way, sir," Jimmy said when they had lighted up, "another woman has come to town who has got me guessing a little. She's at the Europa, registered as Mrs. Rebecca Isaacs of New York."

Lane glanced at him, and puffed out a cloud of smoke. He said negligently:

"Mrs. Isaacs? Oh, yes. I've had a call from her. She's in trouble. Hunting for a friend. I was sorry, but I could see no way to aid her. What has she done to occasion remark, this Mrs. Isaacs? She appeared to be an inoffensive little soul."

Jimmy related the series of incidents that had come under his notice. As he did, he realized how trivial they really seemed.

"It does sound rather silly, sir," he confessed. "If it wasn't for that roof business I don't suppose I'd have given her a second thought. That looked a little queer to me."

Lane nodded, but offered no comment. Jimmy drew on his cigar a while.

"Hang it," he volleyed out all at once, "I'm stumped again!" He informed Lane rapidly of the anonymous note to Ortega, and Enrique's belief that Mary Taylor had sent it. "If she did," he concluded, "we are wrong about the dispatch. She wouldn't help Kaufman with one hand, and strike him with the other. It's not in reason."

"No," said Lane laconically, "it isn't."

He did not appear to be greatly surprised at the news of the wireless, possibly because he had come to suspect Kaufman of some secret means of communication with Arraca.

"Well," decided Jimmy, "I'm not going to bother my head about it any longer. What I came for principally, sir, was to ask you to renew that luncheon invitation of the other day. I want a sight of Kaufman before I come to grips with him."

"The lunch—most assuredly, my boy; but Herr Kaufman—I have heard that he is confined to his room with a bad cold. The result of his trip."

Jimmy stared at him.

"Why, then, perhaps he won't come out tonight!" he cried disappointedly.

"Perhaps," Lane smiled, "it is to conceal his activities. This dispatch means work for him. His wireless, James, will be busy tonight."

"Maybe it won't," declared Jimmy, much relieved. "Segovia is going to attend to that. And that brings me to a favor I wish to ask. Segovia was to drive my car. As he is assigned to other work I want to use Billy Smith. I may want to use him for several days."

The American minister threw up both hands. His face was a picture of consternation.

"Impossible!" he gasped. "We are on neutral ground. The acts of a plenipotentiary are the acts of the nation he represents. It would be——"

Jimmy impolitely cut him short.

"Oh, I say Mr. Lane! With Kaufman planning to violate Zanhoria's neutrality and compel the United States to intervene? We've a right to checkmate him. It's a duty, by Jove!"

"Yes, yes, but to give open aid——"

"Call it secret aid then," interrupted Jimmy again. "President Hurango is giving it, and so can you. Anyway, Billy Smith is gone. He's sick. I told him he was, and Mr. Whittaker sent him home. He won't be around till Monday, and you needn't know what he's doing in the meantime."

The harassed envoy had risen and was

striding about the room in a stew of perplexity. But it was subsiding; he could see his way out. He brought up at the desk as Jimmy finished, and said with a severity his eyes belied:

"Smith is discharged—ah—ahumph—resigned, I should say. It dates from this morning. He is no longer connected with the legation. It is not responsible for his acts."

Jimmy drew down his mouth in a lugubrious grimace.

"I am pained to hear it," he murmured. "Mr. Smith impressed me as a young man with a future in the diplomatic service. Shall we go to lunch, sir? I think I could circumvent a *tortilla con camerones*."

"You everlasting young rascal!" sputtered the minister. "You have ruined my appetite with this scrape you are leading me into. But come on. I hope your omelette will choke you."

The laugh that had been bubbling under the surface brimmed over with this dire invocation, and the Hon. John Henry gave way to it. Jimmy joined in, and upon this scene of mirth the pale face of Mr. Whittaker looked in.

"A cable, sir—personal," he announced.

"Ah—ahumph." The minister grasped at the tatered ends of his official dignity and drew them about him. "Thank you, Whittaker. And—er—Whittaker! Mr. Smith has resigned from the staff. He is no longer with us."

The secretary gulped. This news was near to strangling him.

"S-sir!" he stuttered. "Why I—do I understand——"

"You do. He has resigned. Make an entry in the records to that effect, please."

The minister waved him away, and took his seat at the desk to decode the message. Jimmy watched him. He raised his head presently, and wagged it at him solemnly.

"My boy," he said, "your uncle must have done this. It's the quickest thing I've ever known."

"What is?" asked Jimmy, mystified.

"The gunboat *Lincoln*, Lieutenant Norris, is ordered from Colon to Puerto Mono. And it was only Tuesday that I cabled the request! It—why damme, James, it's astonishing! I didn't look for action under a week, at the soonest."

Jimmy snickered at his thunderstruck expression. He couldn't help it.

"I reckon it's the war, sir, not Uncle Allan. They'll be cutting lots of red tape up there in Washington before we get through with these Germans. So what's the use in wrapping ourselves up with it down here?"

"That," said Lane quickly, "is an altogether different matter. Those shears they use can clip off heads as well as tape, and I'm not anxious to see mine rolling in the basket. No! I've given you Smith. Make the best of him. It is all you will get out of me, James."

Jimmy's teeth showed in a joyous grin.

"Not quite all, your Excellency—unless you are going to renege on that lunch," he remarked.

BILLY SMITH, like a good soldier, followed instructions to the letter. Nine o'clock was striking when he knocked on Jimmy's door. But all the afternoon he had been burning up, not with fever but with a consuming curiosity to know what the project was for which he had been drafted.

He found Jimmy sitting by the window, smoking a cigar and looking out on the lighted plaza and the people taking the cooling air. The room was dark except for such illumination as came from the hall transom and from the square below.

"Well, here I am, fresh as fish and ready to be broiled, boiled or dished up any way you say," announced Billy, striving for an unconcern he was far from feeling.

"There are cigars on the table. Light one and sit down," Jimmy bade him.

"Huh, what's this, a Quaker meeting?" Billy inquired peevishly when he had done as directed and Jimmy vouchsafed no further word with him. "I thought something was doing?"

Jimmy laughed.

"I was just going over in my mind a few things," he answered. "Listen Billy. You are not on sick leave. You are out of a job. You've resigned. Lane told me so. Arson, burglary or murder—go as far as you like. The legation is not responsible for your acts."

"The dickens!" squeaked Billy. Then: "Say, the old man is a regular fellow when he shortens some of the sail he carries, isn't he?"

"He is. Now pay attention, youngster. I'm going to tell you what we are in for, you and me."

Jimmy sketched for the eager boy the salient happenings of the last few days. Billy drank in his words thirstily.

"I knew something was going on," he cried. "I felt it in my bones. And this Miss Taylor. I had her right, hey? Gee, what a lovely mix-up! How long do you suppose we've got to wait here?"

"Until we are sent for. That's all I know."

They smoked in silence for a time. Billy broke it.

"That magazine you wanted me to look up, Jimmy: established 1870; circulation sixty thousand."

"Um," mused Jimmy. "I could cable and find out if she's really writing for it, but what's the use? I'll save my coin."

"Oh!" exclaimed Billy. "Of course Lane told you that Mrs. Ikey called? I meant to speak of it when you were at the shop, but you had me raving with a fever before I could get around to it. What did she want of his greatness?"

"Wanted help to find her mislaid uncle, Lane said. She was with him only a short time I gathered."

"What's that! A short time? She was jazzing with him an hour by the clock. I took note of it."

Jimmy smiled at the picture that presented itself.

"Poor Lane! She must have bored him horribly."

"He had his compensation later," giggled Billy. "Peaches and cream. Oh, boy!"

They talked on for a while, gradually running down until finally they lapsed into a hushed companionship of waiting. Ten o'clock had rung out from La Caridad long since. Now it struck eleven. Billy remarked on it lazily.

"Sounds like some big old buoy bell."

A correlation of ideas brought to Jimmy's mind a thing he had forgotten to mention to Billy. He said:

"Washington is sending us a warship from Colon. Lane got word this noon after you'd gone. The *Lincoln*, Lieutenant Norris in command. Know it?"

"Oh, gosh!" groaned Billy. "That old tub? It's a single-screw converted gunboat. A few four-inch rifles and some six-pounders. You can squeeze ten knots out of her if you don't care if she falls apart. Why didn't they send something with heels to it?"

"It will get to Puerto Mono in time to keep Peralta from landing."

"Pish!" snorted Billy. "But we should worry. It's Popper Kaufman we're after. If we get him Peralta will blow up with his own gas."

"You are forgetting something," Jimmy said soberly. "We may blow up instead. We haven't any cinch on this job we've undertaken."

They heard hurried steps in the hall. Some one rapped on the door. Billy jumped to his feet, but Jimmy was before him, and opened to the messenger, Mr. Ricardo Gomez. It was the clerk's "night on." He tumbled out his words breathlessly.

"I come myself, Mr. Perree—*á todo correr*. It is urgent. Señor Enrique Segovia, he have encounter a *délabrement*—a damage to him. He would see you, sir, Mr. Perree. A car it attends."

"Here's a mess!" exclaimed Billy. "We can't——"

Jimmy shut him off with a peremptory gesture. He turned to Gomez.

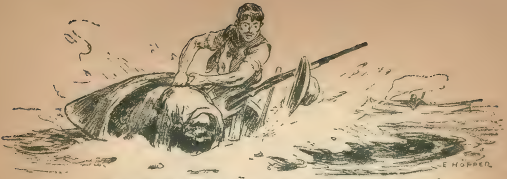
"You say he has sent a car for us?"

"It attends, yes. 'I have been send for Mr. Perree,' the chauffeur remark to me——"

"We'll go," Jimmy interrupted, a light breaking on him. "Grab that box of cigars on the bureau, Billy. Get a move on."

As he pocketed his door-key Jimmy observed that Mrs. Isaacs' room was dark. Either she had slipped in very quietly, or she was staying out very late. It was just a thought that crossed his mind, and it went as it had come, leaving no impression.

TO BE CONTINUED



THE TRAIL AT LANDRY

by Nevil G. Henshaw

Author of "The Killer, the Kid, and the Bad Man," "For France," etc.

THIS is an age of wholesale conversion. In the cities of the East and West noted evangelists herd thousands into hastily constructed tabernacles and, by dint of fiery words, and still more fiery gestures, invoke their religious zeal. Thus, when the blaze of fervor burns its fiercest, an end is accomplished—an end involving an open profession of faith, sealed by means of a handclasp with no less a person than the evangelist himself. This, in the present jargon inevitable to all movements of magnitude, is known as "Hitting the Trail."

In the French, or Cajun parishes of southwestern Louisiana noted evangelists are unknown. There the people are for the most part of one creed, so that the congregations of the various *curés* form a fairly complete census of the population. Yet even here certain spiritual slackers turn a deaf ear to the voice of duty, causing the good fathers to labor mightily in their effort to set these wayward feet upon the trail.

All of which brings us finally to the affair of old man Polyte Greig.

I

IT WAS the feast of All Saints and, in the words of Landry folk, old man Polyte was "at it again." He stood upon the porch of the coffee-house, his body flattened out against one of the broad, supporting pillars, his right arm rising at regular intervals to the accompanying kick and crash of his ancient, heavy revolver. Outside, in the live-oak grove that shaded the village square, the Varo brothers wove their ponies in and out of the protecting tree-trunks, as they pumped their answering shots into the echoing emptiness of the coffee-house porch.

Inside the bar such unfortunate patrons as had been cut off from an escape to the rear, crouched low in their corners, voicing a general complaint that old man Polyte should have chosen the pillar in line with the open front door. And from behind the bar itself came a wail of anguish as Savoy, the proprietor, hearkened to the havoc wrought by stray bullets amid his carefully arranged bottles and glassware.

The origin of the trouble dated back some two years before. Then there had been three Varo brothers, Paul, Jules and Bébé. Following a quarrel between old man Polyte and Paul the number had been reduced to two. This should have ended the affair, especially as the grand jury in the near-by city of Mouton had returned a verdict of self-defense in old man Polyte's favor.

The remaining Varos, however, had been dissatisfied with this verdict. Hence there had developed a species of guerilla warfare involving numerous pitched battles, each of them staged at Landry. Also, since your Cajun dearly loves a fight, there had been no attempt at interference.

They were something to look forward to, these clashes that occurred whenever the Varos rode in for a feast-day. There was a quality of unexpectedness about them that was fascinating. The Varos chose no particular time for their onslaughts. It might be morning, or noon, or the edge of twilight, when a thudding of hoofs and a shouting of profane challenges would announce their arrival. Then old man Polyte would arise from his interminable euchre to bang away with his venerable Colt until such time as the Varos chose to take their departure.

Now, whereas these combats might appear to possess a certain inequality in point of numbers, this inequality was made up for by the mode of attack. For if old man Polyte fought one man against two, he also fought on his feet with his weapon at rest, while his opponents sought such meager results as could be obtained from the backs of their wildly cavorting ponies. Indeed, if there existed an advantage, this advantage was probably on the side of old man Polyte. At all events it was considered fair fight at Landry, which was enough.

Thanks to this method of warfare, the combatants had thus far emerged unscathed, or at most with trifling wounds. It was held, however, that such a condition could not prevail forever. Sooner or later a serious injury or even a death would occur, invoking the law at Mouton.

Accordingly the present affair was followed with especial interest by such of the inhabitants and visitors as were in the rear, or safely out of range. They watched with the intent yet pensive air of folk who await the curtain upon some well-known and long-cherished drama.

For a time the conflict ran true to form. Shouting, whipping, firing, the Varos dodged about the grove amid the frenzied shying and bridle-snapping of the various teams that were hitched about them. From his stronghold old man Polyte replied deliberately and mechanically, as one who performs an oft-repeated public duty. Nor did he so much as flinch when an occasional well-aimed shot smacked into the pillar before him. They built well at Landry, and inside the hollow square was a supporting round of solid cypress.

The watchers, observing this well-ordered procedure, took heart of grace. Perhaps, after all, the next feast-day would not lack its usual excitement.

It was precisely at this moment that the long-dreaded catastrophe occurred. Who fired the shot, whether Jules or Bébé Varo, was never determined. It was only known that the bullet struck an edge of the pillar, and then, by some abominable freak of luck, glanced off and around to enter the body of its lone defender.

With a grunt of pain, old man Polyte dropped his weapon and swung out to the edge of the porch. Here he stood for a moment, fumbling at his chest, his expression changing from vague uncertainty to startled realization.

"Behold, I am killed," he announced thickly.

Then, all of a sudden, he collapsed, plumping over in a heap upon the ground.

As for the Varos, so great was their surprise, that they would have proven easy prey for any who might have wished to apprehend them. But there was no established law at Landry, and so, having recovered themselves, the brothers wheeled about and loped rapidly out of town.

II

ALL this time Père Martain, the curé of Landry, had been looking on from his churchyard beyond the live-oak grove. He was a small man, very old and fragile, yet in his pale, quiet eyes there shone a light of unconquerable courage and determination. With the departure of the Varos and the surging forward of the crowd, he too hurried across the square.

At the coffee-house he found all in confusion. Men hurried this way and that, calling for a doctor, a priest; while others realizing the gravity of the affair, set out to inform the authorities at Mouton. Pushing his way through the excited throng upon the porch, Père Martain entered the bar and bent over the wounded man.

At sight of him old man Polyte moved uneasily.

"That is all right, *Mon Père*," said he in a low, stubborn voice. "I will go as I have lived. I am not one for a death-bed conversion."

The priest made a gesture of impatience.

"Do not be ridiculous, Hippolyte," he reproved. "I am here first to inquire into the seriousness of your wound. When that is determined it will be time to speak of death-bed conversions."

Again Père Martain bent to his task, while the crowd looked on with respectful attention. He knew something of wounds, this little priest, who had been chaplain of Vigilantes during the bitter days of the reconstruction. Until the doctor arrived, and most probably afterward, his verdict would be accepted as final.

"It is only the shoulder, and high up at that, Hippolyte," he now announced. "Thus you are denied your desire for an impenitent end."

Having made his point, Père Martain did not linger. At once he departed outside, where there closed in upon him certain of the inhabitants who sought to prolong the fast-waning excitement by recounting the affair to each unfortunate who happened along. Thus Père Martain was forced to submit himself to a personally conducted tour of the scene, which began at the exact spot occupied by old man Polyte behind the pillar, and ended with the depression made by his fallen body amid the rank grass at the edge of the porch.

It was while exhibiting this depression that Prejean, the baker, made a discovery. Catching a metallic glint beneath one of the grass tufts, he drew forth a small, flattish object, which he held up between a thumb and forefinger.

"See, it is Polyte's saint," he exclaimed. "Evidently it fell from his pocket when they were carrying him inside."

At this Père Martain exhibited an interest that had been wholly lacking before. Taking the object, he discovered it to be a small, metal case which, when handled, gave forth a faint, rattling sound. Next opening the case, Père Martain up-ended it, and dumped into his palm a leaden image. The image was squat and heavy, and its features suggested a grotesque and impish mirth.

"So," mused Père Martain. "Then this is Hippolyte's saint? You are quite sure?"

"Absolutely," replied Prejean. "It goes with him all the time."

"Then," said the priest, as he turned away, "this is a matter in which I may well take a hand."

That night Père Martain got the image and studied it long and carefully by the light of his lamp. Being more or less of an authority upon saints, he entertained no illusion from the first; yet he felt that here was an affair in which he must not trust entirely to his own judgment. All along he had struggled with the impiety of old man Polyte, and such a thing as a possible advantage was not to be treated lightly.

In the end Père Martain determined that he would take the image to Mouton. There he would show it to his friend, Monsieur Decourt. In his position of notary, Monsieur Decourt was supposed to know everything that was worth knowing at all.

III

FOUR days later Père Martain pocketed the image and set out for the dilapidated hut that old man Polyte occupied upon the edge of the village. As he trudged along, the good priest considered how best he might make use of his discovery. For years he had striven with this particular sinner, only to abandon him as hopeless. Now it appeared that there might be some chance for his redemption.

A man who carried about a saint could not be wholly without belief. Inside him must glow some spark of faith which, if properly fanned, would kindle the fires of devotion.

Thus Père Martain argued with himself; but, as he did so, he remembered that old man Polyte was a master of craft, of subtle evasion. If given a chance, he would be quick to smother this spark of belief beneath the ashes of deceit. He must be approached warily, and with an abruptness that would defeat his powers of evasion. A victory could be accomplished only through the element of surprise.

As he had expected, Père Martain found the wounded man well upon the road to recovery. Indeed, he was already propped up in the narrow bunk that was nailed to one side of his small, stuffy room. His greetings over, Père Martain seated himself upon an empty box that did duty as a chair.

"Well, Hippolyte," he began, "and so you have not made your expected 'go' after all?"

The sufferer grinned a trifle shamefacedly.

"All the same, it is no fun, this getting a bullet in one's body," he replied. "At first it is like the end of everything."

"Yet, believing this, you refused salvation?" said the priest sternly. "Hippolyte, I am ashamed of you. Even though you care nothing for your own soul, you should at least consider the example you set to those about you."

The listener squirmed uncomfortably, while a dull, harrassed look came into his eyes. Evidently he was intensely bored.

"What is the use of going over all that again, *Mon Père?*" he complained. "As I have told you many times, I would believe if I could. Since I can not, there is nothing more to say."

"*Bien,*" agreed the priest. "If you can not believe, if you can tell me truthfully that you have no spark of faith, however small, there is indeed nothing more to say."

"I have already said it," returned old man Polyte. "For the rest, how would it profit me to lie to you?"

Père Martain's moment had come. He was very sincere, yet he could not resist a dramatic flourish as he drew forth and held out the image.

"Then what have you to say to this?" he demanded.

To his surprise, old man Polyte betrayed no consternation. Rather his expression was one of relief, while in his eyes shone an undoubted light of recognition.

"My saint," he exclaimed. "I knew that, sooner or later, it would come to light."

"Then—then you admit that it is yours?" questioned Père Martain uncertainly.

"And why not, since I have carried it ever since my wife gave it to me?" countered old man Polyte. "It was this way. My old woman bought the saint at the fair at Mouton, and always she treasured it; for the man told her that with it would come good fortune. When she was dying she passed it on to me. 'Take it, Polyte, even though you have no faith,' she said. 'Carry it about with you, and it will keep you from harm.' It was a little thing, and I have obeyed her wish. That is all."

Père Martain sighed resignedly. He saw that, for this once at least, the other spoke the truth. The mystery was explained. There had been no spark after all.

"So, Hippolyte," said he. "I understand. Also I commend you for thus remembering your dead wife. Perhaps, as she said, the image will keep you from harm." He paused and added hopefully—"Perhaps it has done so already."

Old man Polyte shrugged. He now spoke as one sure of himself.

"My old woman was like that," he replied. "As for me, I can only judge by what has occurred. In that last fight my saint was with me all the time, yet here I am struck down by a bullet."

"And what of those other fights?" questioned Père Martain.

Old man Polyte shook his head.

"It is this way," said he. "A thing works, or it does not work. As you see, the saint has not worked. If ever it does, I promise that you will hear from me."

Père Martain rose at once. Coming from old man Polyte, this was all that could be expected.

"It is a bargain, Hippolyte," said he quickly. "When the time comes I will hold you to it. Wait and you will see."

Thereupon Père Martain departed in a state of mind not altogether unhopeful. He had great faith; and, despite his faults, old man Polyte was always as good as his given word.

IV

IN SIX days more old man Polyte was up and about his affairs. As for these affairs, had they been separated into two grand divisions, these would have comprised pot-hunting and euchre. When in need of money old man Polyte slaughtered the ducks that infested the lake near Landry. At other times he might be found at the second of the three card-tables in Savoy's coffee-house.

Upon returning to the life of the village old man Polyte made a most pleasing discovery. He found that, during the brief space of his confinement, he had become a sort of hero. Yet this rise in the esteem of his fellow men appeared to be due less to his personal achievements than to the events consequent upon them.

Thanks to the supposed gravity of his wound, the law had appeared at Landry. The sheriff had ridden out to arrest the Varos. Afterward there had been an investigation. During one whole day officers had galloped about creating an excitement that would be spoken of for months to come. In brief, Landry had been put upon the map of the parish and, as all agreed, old man Polyte had put it there.

Be it said of old man Polyte that he made the most of his opportunity. Where another would have boasted his way into speedy disfavor, he preserved a most gratifying and profitable silence. Upon being questioned as to his now historic, "Behold, I am killed," he merely shrugged, as one who would say, "That is my affair."

Following which the inhabitants attributed to him a most amazing foresight.

"He is a keen one, that Polyte," they said. "Whether he imagined himself killed or not, he saw and grasped the opportunity that has made us prominent."

After this old man Polyte's position was secure. Finding both friends and credit at the coffee-house, he established himself permanently at the second of the two card-tables, leaving the ducks to fly unmolested above the marshes of the lake. It was a period of peace for the former hunter, a period unmarred by any bothersome details of finance.

If he won at his euchre, he was that much ahead. If he lost, he merely gave his friends a chance to further expound the beauties of civic gratitude. As for the drinks—just now old man Polyte's presence meant business. So long as this condition prevailed, Savoy would continue to serve them.

Yet for all this, old man Polyte was not long in finding the inevitable fly in the ointment of his content. Or rather, it was two flies, personified by the brothers Varo.

Following old man Polyte's recovery, the authorities had dealt promptly with the Varos. Also they had dealt severely. Perhaps the authorities felt that they had been tricked into making a great deal of fuss over a very ordinary brawl. Perhaps they were simply wearied by the continued lawlessness at Landry. Be this as it may, they sentenced the Varos to six months' work upon the public roads.

Now to the Varos this sentence was unsupportable. Far more would they have preferred the penitentiary or even the gallows. In that event their punishment would have partaken of the heroic. To their friends they would have appeared as martyrs.

But six months of shoveling ahead of a ball and chain! It was as ridiculous as it was disgraceful. They had shot a man, and they were treated like chicken-thieves.

Yet, strangely enough, the Varos bore no resentment against those responsible for their degradation. They placed the blame wholly upon the aged shoulders of old man Polyte. It was all his fault, they declared. He should have died, as he said he would, or at least have made a poor recovery. Then they would have been punished in a manner befitting their endeavors.

But, thanks to a merciful Providence, the matter was not past mending, as old man Polyte should presently learn. They would get him the moment they were out again.

All of which, being duly reported at Landry, caused old man Polyte to enter upon a period of uncomfortable reflection. However, he consoled himself with the thought that six months was a long time, and that the game of "getting" was one at which three could play as well as two.

So the days slipped by while the ancient sinner prospered, a worse example than ever before. So Père Martain waited, gripping hard to his faith, assuring himself that, in the event of success, his victory must now be all the greater. So the public gratitude grew worn and threadbare as, if given time, public gratitude always will.

Then, one day when old man Polyte sat down to his euchre, the end arrived.

"One moment, Polyte," said the others at the table. "Have you any money? Otherwise, there is no place for you. Already you owe us more than we can afford."

A little later, upon the demand of a drink, Savoy replied:

"This time, yes, Polyte. But afterward you must pay. I have worn out no less than two pencils in keeping your score."

Old man Polyte saw and understood. Also he accepted with good grace. He had had a good time, and he knew that good times could not last forever. Besides, it was Friday—always an unlucky day.

That night old man Polyte cleaned his huge muzzle-loader, and took count of his powder and shot. Daybreak found him behind his favorite blind, far out in the heart of the marsh.

Thus old man Polyte missed a most startling piece of news that was brought in by the first early arrivals at the coffee-house. This news came from Mouton, and concerned the Varos. The previous afternoon they had overpowered their guard and, having taken his pistol, had escaped; presumably into the impenetrable cypress swamp that encircled the parish upon the east.

V

IT HAD been a good hunt, and old man Polyte was satisfied. He had bagged a nice bunch of duck and, during a slack in the flight shortly after sunrise, he had managed to slip aside to a near-by burn, and gather in quite a respectable string of snipe. Therefore, shortly after noon, he decided that, for several reasons, he would be justified in calling it a day's work.

To begin with he had hunted the farther marsh, which involved not only the tramp to his boat, but a long row across the lake. Then he must dispose of his game. With poor luck, there might be no euchre before night. However, the next day was Sunday, and Sundays were always long and pleasant at the coffee-house.

It lacked but a little of two o'clock when old man Polyte broke through the marsh rim at the point where he had left his boat. The going had been bad, and the long string of game had become an intolerable burden. As he pushed off, old man Polyte wished that he had a pirogue instead of his clumsy, heavy skiff. But pirogues held little, and were most capricious in the matter of overturning. Also the waters of the lake were cold and deep.

It was shortly after he had left the bank and had settled down to a steady pull that old man Polyte saw a pirogue slip out from the bank a short distance above his starting place. Two men were in the pirogue and, as they paddled swiftly out, they held a course that would bring them directly athwart the path of the skiff. Observing which, old man Polyte rested his oars in anticipation of some friendly demand or greeting.

When it was still quite a distance off the pirogue halted abruptly, and a voice shouted a challenge across the intervening stretch of water. It was a slow, unsteady voice, thick with suppressed excitement and a too liberal indulgence in stolen brandy, yet old man Polyte had little difficulty in recognizing it as the voice of Bébé Varo.

For a moment old man Polyte was overcome by his absolute amazement. He could only falter weakly in reply—

"And so—and so—you are out again?"

"As you see," came back the voice. "We are on our way to safety, but first there is your little account to settle."

To this there seemed but one logical reply. Snatching his gun, old man Polyte emptied both barrels at the speaker. His intentions were good, but his opponents had chosen their distance carefully. Save for a wild scatter of water several yards out from his mark, old man Polyte found that he had only wasted two charges of his woefully diminished powder and shot.

The Varos took their own good time in answering him. Indeed, so long was Bébé Varo in steadying himself and aiming his pistol that old man Polyte had a brief hope that his enemies had run out of shells and were merely trying to scare him. But when a moment later the bullet came whining above the skiff old man Polyte ducked and considered his situation. He was outranged, and his enemies had the whole afternoon before them. The outlook was anything but encouraging.

After a second shot which splintered the skiff's rail, old man Polyte seized his oars and rowed blindly out toward the middle of the lake. The Varos followed leisurely until, realizing the hoplessness of his flight, the fugitive came to rest again. Thereupon the Varos followed their former tactics, only this time it was Jules who shot, his bullets going wider than those of the more accurate Bébé.

From this old man Polyte deducted that his enemies had but a single weapon between them, yet the discovery brought him little comfort. Evidently they were well supplied with shells, and one pistol was amply sufficient for their purpose.

In the intervals between ducking and dodging below the skiff edge, old man Polyte emptied his gun twice in the direction of the pirogue. He did this aimlessly and half-heartedly, more from the desire to be doing something than for any other reason. Then, finding himself reduced to a bare four loads, he crouched low and began to consider his plight to its final detail.

He was in a tight place and, so far as he could see, there was little prospect of his getting out with a whole skin. Any thought of a rescue he dismissed at once. The lake was wide and lonely, and a chance passer-by would not be allowed to interfere. The Varos would see to that. Escape was equally hopeless. The pirogue could overhaul him without effort and, once across and in the heavy going of the marsh, his opponents could easily pick him off from their firmer footing ashore.

True, if he could hold out until after sunset, he might get away under cover of the darkness; but this was hardly to be expected. Evidently the Varos were only playing with him while their pursuers scoured the swamp. With the coming of night they, too, would be faced with the necessity of escape. Before the light failed they would most certainly risk a dash inside the dead-line. But even the chance of this was remote. Sooner or later they must get in a lucky shot that would render their finishing the affair a mere matter of paddling alongside.

The next half-hour was the longest and hardest that old man Polyte had ever known. The prospect of violent death was bad enough, but worst of all was the grim silence of the Varos. If they had reviled him, if they had taunted him, it would have been easier. Then, infuriated by their jeers, he might have achieved a state where he would have been wholly reckless of the consequences.

But, save for their first challenge, the Varos hung on sullen and wordless. Perhaps they counted upon the effect of their muteness. Perhaps they realized that this was no light-hearted duel, but a matter of cold-blooded assassination. At all events they uttered no heartening gibe or oath, even lowering their voices to an indistinct murmur when they spoke between themselves.

Jules, who steadied the pirogue, would occasionally refresh himself from a bottle which he raised with his free hand. Bébé, displaying a truly remarkable self-denial, touched never a drop. However, as he had taken over the shooting entirely, the cause of his abstinence was only too plain.

As for old man Polyte, he could only sit and watch for the next attack. Then it was squirm, and twist, and flounder, until the fusillade was safely over.

Shortly after three o'clock a bullet grazed the fleshy part of old man Polyte's right arm. The wound was trifling, but its significance was great. Each time now Bébé shot closer. Also, emboldened by their success, the Varos pushed in for a distance of several strokes. Firing an experimentary shot, old man Polyte found that his charge just managed to rattle lightly against the pirogue's side. At this the Varos broke their long silence with a laugh. Evidently the end was close at hand.

Realizing this, old man Polyte cast a final, sweeping glance about the lake. Far away a sailboat was tacking close inshore, and he waved at it frantically. But either the crew misunderstood, or felt no desire to become embroiled in another's quarrel. The boat tacked on.

Thus, for the first time, old man Polyte began seriously to consider the question of a future life. He thought of prayer, and wondered vaguely if it would do any good. Then he remembered his saint, and a flash of sardonic humor caused him to withdraw the case and tumble out the image upon his leathery palm. A moment he glared at the tiny figure, answering its grin with a fierce, malevolent snarl.

"You are a fine saint," he growled. "As a protector you are no more good than one of Bébé's bullets. *Bien*, you will go where you belong, overside."

With his arm upraised and ready to throw, old man Polyte had another idea. It now occurred to him that the image was like a bullet in still another way. It was round, and leaden, and heavy—a very proper slug, in fact. If he loaded it and shot straight enough, he might get Bébé Varo. Afterward the rest would be easy.

With one eye upon the Varos, old man Polyte began to load the empty barrel of his gun. He worked feverishly, yet he took care to put in an extra heavy charge of powder. Next he tinkled down the image, ramming it home with a thick wadding of newspaper.

His enemies looked on derisively. Not only had they moved in to improve their range. They had also hoped for just this final expenditure of their victim's ammunition. Of the consequences they had not the slightest fear. They knew that, had old man Polyte been possessed of anything heavier than birdshot he would have used it at the start.

His loading finished, old man Polyte leveled his gun, steadying it upon the edge of the skiff. Very carefully he shifted the barrel until it covered a spot directly in the center of Bébé Varo's chest. Then, before he pulled, he invoked the image, pleading with it in a muffled undertone.

"Come, Saint, come," he muttered. "You can do it if you will."

At the report Bébé Varo jerked suddenly to his knees. There he swung for a moment, uttering a strange, guttural cry that was not unlike the croak of a frog. Then he pitched forward, capsizing the pirogue in a smother of icy water.

This much old man Polyte saw as he snatched his oars. An instant later, when he straightened up again, Bébé Varo was gone. Jules, shivering and gasping, pawed desperately at the slimy, bobbing bottom of the overturned pirogue. He was so close that, had he wished to, the watcher could have reached him by shoving out an oar.

"Good saint," murmured old man Polyte as he picked up his gun. And, while cocking it, "My old woman was right."

Emulating the Varos, he took his own good time with the second barrel. He felt that, under the circumstances, the least he could do was to make a good job of it.

VI

AT NINE o'clock the following morning old man Polyte knocked upon Père Martain's front door. In his eyes there was a furtive, hunted look, yet the outthrust of his lean jaw suggested a stubborn determination.

Answering the summons himself, Père Martain came out upon the porch.

"Well, Hippolyte?" said he.

Old man Polyte uncovered, answering the greeting with a brief downward jerk of his head.

"You have heard, *Mon Père?*" he questioned.

"I have," answered the priest. "That is why I sent for you."

Old man Polyte glanced up, then down. He seemed terribly ill at ease.

"About the saint," he muttered. "I am sorry, *Mon Père*. I hope that it was not sacrilege?"

If Père Martain felt inclined to smile, he betrayed the fact by not so much as the twitching of a muscle.

"No, it was not sacrilege," he replied. "Besides there was nothing else to do."

"So," said old man Polyte, his tone hinting at dejection rather than relief.

"Well, Hippolyte?" repeated the priest, this time in a voice that could not be denied.

There fell a pause during which old man Polyte was swayed by indecision. Just behind him lay the coffee-house with its warmth, its snugness, its never-ending good cheer. There he would be more of a hero than ever. A seat of honor awaited him at the second of the three card-tables. In front was the church with its cold interior, its hard kneeling benches, its long, scourging sermons that were delivered against just such sinners as himself.

Old man Polyte's look was piteous. Then it became dogged.

"*Bien, Mon Père,*" he answered. "As before, you will find me as good as my word."

A LITTLE later, after the ringing of the second bell, Père Martain stood watching as the last of the congregation entered his church. Beside him Prejean, the baker, held forth upon the all-absorbing event of the day before.

"It is incredible, *Mon Père,*" ran on Prejean. "Of course nothing will be done since the Varos were fugitives, and began the affair themselves. It was all seen by those upon Lartigue's boat. But consider Polyte. Here he has destroyed three brothers—two of them with a saint."

This time Père Martain permitted his smile.

"It was not a saint, Prejean," he replied. "I myself took the image to Mouton, where Monsieur Decourt recognized it and explained. It is what you call a Billi—a Billi.—But I can not remember the name. I can only tell you that it is a toy, the possession of which is supposed to bring good luck."

"Just the same, we all thought it a saint, Polyte the most of all," persisted Prejean.

Père Martain's tone became patient.

"My friend," said he, "the workings of Providence are beyond us, but of one thing we may be sure. Always they result in good. Use your eyes, and you will see."

By now the last stragglers had entered the church, all save one. This straggler, tall, ancient, and weatherbeaten, moved gingerly forward, treading the worn wooden steps as if they were a ladder of swords. Upon the church porch he hesitated, half-turning as though for a backward look across the square. Then, with a sudden desperate twist, he lurched inside.

There was no famous exhorter, no monstrous tabernacle, no vast choir of a thousand singers. Only the fragile priest, the tiny church, the few, untrained voices.

Nevertheless old man Polyte had hit the trail.

A PREVARICATED PARADE

by W.C.Tuttle

Author of "Clean Crazy," "Monkeying with Ancestors," etc.

"AND for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor."

Hank Padden shifted his seat on the top pole of the corral, and marks the place with his finger.

"Now," says he, "shall I orate the names of the men who signed it?"

"Never mind," replies old man Whittaker. "We don't know none of them, personally, so we'll let what you've already read be sufficient and plenty. After listening to all you've read out of that book, Hank, I'm of the impression that she's a fitting day to be celebrated. What do you think, Hen?"

"She's worth a passing memorial," says I, and "Scenery" Sims, the fourth member of our committee, nods his head:

"She sure is, gents. I never cared for kings, except in jack-pots, and our glorious forefathers sure did proclaim their feelings. I'm with yuh from the hondo to the saddle-horn."

That makes it unanimous. The night before there's a meeting in Paradise, and they appoints me and Scenery, Hank Padden and old man Whittaker as a committee to investigate the reasons and so forth of the Fourth of July, and whether, in our own minds, she's of sufficient import to consider a celebration.

We finds that she is. Hank Padden reads us the reasons out of a dictionary, while we sets there on the corral top, at the Cross J.

Old man Whittaker owns the Cross J, Hank Padden the Seven A, and Scenery Sims is the possessor of the Circle S outfit and the squeakiest voice ever anchored in the throat of a human being. Every time I hears Scenery start to talk I pray for cylinder oil or chloroform. Me? I'm Henry Clay Peck. I work for old man Whittaker. I ain't got nothing but a conscience, a heap of respect for the truth and the feeling that I lowers myself when I punches cows.

We has just arrived at our conclusion when "Muley" Bowles saunters down to the corral, climbs up beside us and bends our seat all to pieces. We four moves to the next section for safety. Muley weighs so much that he has to bandage his bronc's legs with splints to keep it from being bow-legged. The world lost a cracking good poet when Muley essayed to punch cows. He don't look the part, not having soulful eyes nor emaciated ribs, but when it comes to making up poetry he's got 'em all lashed to the snubbing-post.

"Has the committee arrived at a satisfactory conclusion?" he asks, puffing hard on his cigaret, and shaking out a new rope.

"When the facts is made public we'll let yuh know with the rest," squeaks Scenery, who dislikes Muley a heap.

"Who's talking to you?" demands Muley. "Scenery, you takes too much upon yourself. I been thinking of a sweet little rhyme what sounds like this, and I gives yuh three guesses who I mean:

"He had a squeaky little voice,
A skinny little frame.
He lived in God's own country,
But the country wa'n't to blame.
Comparing him with growed-up men,
Who rode the Sawtooth Hills,
He looked like a pewter nickel
In a bunch of green-back bills."

"Yah-h-h-h!" shrills Scenery. "You're sore 'cause you wasn't elected to the committee. Lard!"

Scenery puts all the venom in his system into that last word, and at the finish his voice would have split a cigaret paper. As he makes his greasy statement his right boot snaps up to horizontal, and Muley's loop gets him around the ankle.

It sure was one beautiful and speedy piece of rope work, and the next minute Scenery is on his shoulders in the corral, with his right foot snubbed high and handsome to the top of a corral post.

Muley lights his cigaret and climbs down the other side.

"The committee will have to turn him loose," he states. "I won't pollute my hands by touching him. I reckon the acid in his measly little carcass will ruin that metal hondo before he gets loose, but it's worth it."

Muley peers through the poles of the corral and grins at Scenery.

"Next time yuh opines to speak of a by-product of your family, Scenery, don't look at me," he states.

Our nerves are rasped considerable before we gets Scenery calmed down, but we finally pacifies him, and all sets in judgment on the Fourth of July again.

"Now that we've decided to celebrate—how'll we do it?" asks Hank. "She ought to be did befitting the solemnity of the occasion, hadn't it, Whittaker?"

"She deserves it," agrees the old man. "We'll have a salute at sunrise, won't we? Then what'll we do?"

"We got to have a pe-rade," squeaks Scenery. "Them is necessary adjunct to celebrations. I was down to Cottonwood last Fourth, and they sure had a humdinger of a pe-rade. Had a feller all dressed up in a fancy hat and a sash, riding in front, and then comes a lot of dress-up wagons, what they designates as floats. They has a beautiful gal all dressed up to imitate Miss Columbus, and——"

"Who's she?" asks Hank.

"Don't you know who Columbus was?" asked Scenery, and Hank nods.

"Well, don't ask fool questions then," squeaks Scenery. "They has hoss-races, foot-races and——"

"They didn't have nothing that we can't have," pronounces Hank.

"We can have all that. I'll ride at the head of the pe-rade and——"

"That ain't unanimous," interrupts Scenery. "Why you any more than me, Hank? Next thing we know you'll want to be Miss Columbus."

"Hang on to yourselves," advises Whittaker. "You fellers elects yourselves to everything—seems to me. A leading man in a pe-rade ought to dress the part, I reckon. When I lives in Great Falls I'm elected as a ornery member of a organization. It had something to do about woodcraft, and we dresses up like a plush hoss, when we meets. I still got my war-bonnet and pants left. Some son of a gun stole the coat. I still got my ax, too."

"You still got the ax?" squeaks Scenery. "Wonderful! Go home and cut some wood. I think your fire's out."

"While you old spavs are fighting for honors, what's the matter with considering me?" I asks. "You're all so danged old and stove-up that you'd have to lead it in a lumber-wagon. Look at me, and step back in the ranks. I'm young, handsome——"

"Pause!" yelps Scenery. "Pause, Hen. It takes brains to lead a pe-rade."

"Then let's not quarrel," says I. "We ain't elegible. Let's settle these little details later and in a place what ain't so dry. It won't be the Fourth of July until day after tomorrow, so let's adjourn."

THEY AGREES. Scenery and Hank goes home, and I goes up to the bunk-house, where "Telescope" Tolliver and Muley are playing pitch.

"Hen, what has the committee decided to do?" askes Telescope.

I tells him what our plans are, so far, and while I'm telling in comes "Chuck" Warner, the prize liar of Yaller Rock County. Chuck punches cows with us for a living, and carries the greatest assortment of prevarications on earth as a side-line. I been with him so long that at times I shades the truth a little, too.

"They can't all lead the pe-rade, that's a cinch," states Chuck. "I seen a pe-rade down to New York one time that——"

"You never was in New York," states Telescope.

"I was born there," declares Chuck, wiggling his ears.

"In Pima County, Arizona," says Telescope. "I know when, too, Chuck."

"Dates don't count, Telescope. I said I was born in New York, and it's my business if I wants to stick to my statement. Now, Telescope, if you said you was born in a teepee on a Digger reservation I wouldn't argue with you for a minute. I'd take it as Gospel. A feller has a right to a birthplace, and I takes New York."

That argument shows Chuck Warner in his native state. He's got a face like a bronc, shortest legs on earth, and can wiggle his ears like a burro. The only time he can't look yuh square in the eye is when he's telling the truth.

"Yuh ought to get somebody with a little style to lead that pe-rade, Hen," opines Muley.

"Might get 'Pole Cat' Perkins or 'Harelip' Hansen," laughs Telescope. "Have Harelip ride one of his goats, and have Pole Cat walk slow behind him, leading a skunk. Have the goat wear the old man's striped pants, and put Scenery's hat on the skunk."

"You fellers ought to be on the committee," says I, sarcastic-like. "Yuh might get up your own pe-rade."

"That's a good scheme," agrees Chuck. "We'll form a offensive and defensive alliance."

"Offensive is right," says I, and then I goes up to see the old man.

The next morning me and the old man goes to Paradise, and goes into executive session, with Scenery and Hank, in the rear of Dug Chaffin's saloon. Hank pounds on the table with his boot heel, and calls the roll. We're all present.

"Gents," asks Hank, "who is going to lead the pe-rade?"

We looks at each other, and then the old man clears his throat.

"I looked up them lodge raiment, and they're dazzlers."

"I still got that hard hat that I wore to a Dimmicrat rally down to Silver Bend ten year ago," orates Scenery. "She looks a heap dignified, and it's too small for any of you fellers. I got a sword, too—in a holster."

"To lead a pe-rade a man ought to look dignified—not his clothes," proclaims Hank.

"This here glory thing is going to cause hard feelings," says I. "I moves that we does like this: we'll all be here before the pe-rade is ready to start, and we'll let some uninterested party pick out the suitable person for to lead it. Dress for the part, and if yuh don't get picked, be a good sport and pe-rade anyway."

"That'll keep the mortality down to a certain extent," agrees Hank, and the other two nods.

"Now," says Hank, "how about this person to be Miss Columbus?"

"I got her picked," states Scenery. "I nominates Miss Eulalie McFee."

"Sheriff's daugher, eh?" laughs Hank. "She's so danged thin that if she stood edgeways yuh couldn't see her, Scenery. I nominates Miss Maggie Smith, niece of 'Doughgod' Smith. Who seconds the motion?"

"Miss Columbus ought to be a danged sight better-looking than Maggie Smith," states the old man. "Who ever heard of Miss Columbus with crossed eyes and freckles? I marks X at the top of my ticket for Miss Clarice Chaffin, daughter of Dug. Do I hear an agreeable voice?"

"Haw! Haw!" roars Hank. "Clarice Chaffin! This contest ain't for no animated flag-pole, Whittaker. How's your sentiments, Hen?"

"I leans toward Mrs. Genevieve Saunders, widder of the late 'Slim' Saunders. She'd fill the part."

"It would be danged small if she didn't," Scenery. "She weighs at least two hundred and——"

"Scenery," says I, "some day I'm going to hang a pebble on your neck, throw yuh into a tin cup of water and drown yuh."

"Let's vote on it," suggests Hank.

"It don't require no vote," replies Whittaker. "If Hen wants to drown Scenery I'm——"

"I mean vote on the lady!" snaps Hank.

We did. We each cast a vote for our choice, and it starts a argument that's a humdinger, and before we leaves the council-chamber we're mentally wallering in each other's gore.

Paradise is busy fixing up floats and decorations, and we're asked a lot of questions that we don't dare to answer.

"Who is going to lead the pe-rade?" whispers Doughgod to me, and I whispers back—

"I am."

He follers me for a distance, and whispers once more—

"Hen, who is going to be Miss Columbus?" I answers—

"The widder Saunders."

"Hank told me that my niece, Maggie was going to be her."

"Hank's a liar," says I, and Doughgod nods, and walks away.

I'm over at the rack, cinching up my saddle, when here comes Dug Chaffin.

"Henry, I'm looking for information that I can't seem to get from any of your cohorts. Who is due to be Miss Columbus tomorrow?"

"The widder Saunders. That's settled, Dug."

"Do you know that old man Whittaker is a liar?" he asks, and I nods. "Yes, he's a liar," declares Dug. "He said he'd stick for Clarice 'till hell froze over."

"He got cold feet," says I, and Dug goes back to his palace of sin, in a unhappy mood.

I gets on my bronc and points toward the Cross J. I'm sick of being on a committee, and having to hurt people's feelings. Paradise ain't no safe place to cause discord in. There's a sentiment in that place that leans towards shooting first and asking questions afterwards. There's only one thing the whole place will agree on, and that is this: yuh can't have a royal flush if your opponent has four kings.

"Stuttering" Stevens thought he'd establish a precedent by holding one against kings and sevens in one hand and kings and eights in another. The coroner said that either shot would have been fatal. Stuttering must a been guilty, 'cause no man would steal kings to make up two pair.

I hammers my bronc along down to where the Cross J road forks with the one from Silver Bend, when I hears a peculiar noise. Sounds to me like a threshing machine with St. Vitus dance. My bronc shows signs of nervousness, so I gets off. Pretty soon it comes in sight, and I recognizes it as being an autymobile, the same of which ain't been in this country since the one belonging to Scenery Sims runs over some dynamite at Piperock and evaporates.

MY BRONC drags me off into the mesquite for a ways, until I can get my rope around a bush and stop him, and then I pilgrims back to the road. At first I don't recognize the inhabitant of that carriage. I looks him over, careful-like, and then he grins and betrays himself. It's old "Calamity" Carson. I ain't seen him for five years, and I shakes his hand industrious-like. After we gets through pumping elbows I leans back and surveys his equipage.

"Some vehicle, eh, Henry?" he says, with a dusty grin. "Surprised to see me?"

"Well, not exactly, Calamity. We been expecting yuh."

"Expecting me?" he wonders aloud. "I suppose 'Tellurium' had to go and tell everybody."

"Uh-huh," I agrees. "Tellurium Woods never could keep still."

So far as I know Tellurium ain't been in Paradise for six months, but he's as good as anybody to blame it on. Him and Calamity used to be pardners.

"Well, well!" says Calamity, brushing the dust off his mustache, and giving his cigaret a chance to burn hair freely. "Here I been figuring on surprising the old-timers, and I been told upon by a friend. Henry Peck, I done sold out my property over in the Little Rockies, and now I'm rich.

"I got more money than a dog has fleas, but I ain't enjoyed it none. I opines to throw a surprise into Paradise, so I buys this gasoline buckboard, has her shipped to Silver Bend, and here I am. She's worse than any outlaw bronc that ever flinched under a saddle, Henry, and I'm older by years and years than I was a week ago when a man teached me how to drive it. I don't know what makes her run. All I got to do is put gasoline in her, twist her tail a few times, pull the designated levers, and point her away from the stumps. She sure makes enough noise."

"You figured the time right, Calamity," says I. "Paradise sure is doing itself proud in your honor."

"In my honor?" What's the idea, Henry?"

"Well, yuh see it ain't often that a town can have a former inhabitant come home rich and distinguished like you are. The public sure admires a man with a chunk off the root of all evil, Calamity. We've decorated in your honor, and tomorrow we parades before yuh to show our admiration and respect. Sabe?"

"My gosh, Henry!" he snorts. "This is too much."

"It's considerable, Calamity, but look who you are."

"That's a fact, Henry—it sure is. Well, well!"

He sets there, with a far-away look in his eyes, and that cigaret sizzling on his mustache, and sudden-like he reaches under the seat and hauls out a jug.

"Henry Peck, I been saving this for my old friends—Tellurium, Doughgod, 'Half Mike' Smith, et cettry, but you qualifies, Henry. Your oration sure puts joy into my old heart. Go as deep as yuh like."

I sets there in his gas go-devil, and we swears allegiance to each other. We celebrates our new-found friendship, and regales each other with anecdotes. I tells him all the neighborhood gossip, and we toast each and every one. He tells me about his property in the Little Rockies, and we drinks a toast to all the little rocks.

My bronc gets the rope loose, and passes us on his way home. We toasts the Cross J and my pinto.

"Who did yuh say was going to lead the pe-rade in my honor?" asks Calamity.

"I am. Being your best friend, Calamity, I'm elegible. I'll ride that pinto bronc at the head end of that great conglomeration. How'd yuh like that, old-timer?"

"I got a better idea," says he, solemn-like. "I'll teach yuh how to run this here contraption, and you lead her in this. How'd yuh like to do that, Henry?"

"Sounds to me like the voice of angels. What yuh packing in them two cans in the rear?"

"Gasoline. Twenty gallons I shipped with the car. All yuh got to do is to twist that front crank until she starts humming. Sabe? Then yuh get in and let this here brake loose. You get out and give her a twist, Henry. That's the first lesson."

I falls out and ambles around to the front. I grasps the crank in both hands, gives it a man-sized yank, slips with both feet, and that juggernaut runs right across my floating ribs. She sure squashes me a plenty, and I don't more than start to get up when here she comes right back to run over me again. Calamity stops her just in time.

"You forgot the e-mergency," observes Calamity, scared-like, over the back of the seat.

"Maybe," says I. "I forgot my name and address, too, if that's anything to snort over. What are yuh supposed to do—put her against a rock to start her?"

"It's a simple thing, Hen."

"Yes, so is a stick uh dynamite," says I, rubbing the kinks out of my hide. "Let's not call school right now, Calamity. We'll go up to the Cross J, where prying eyes can see us not, and there yuh can show me all things. Anyway yuh don't want to show up in Paradise today. Everybody is busy getting things ready, and if you was to go down there now they'd drop everything. Sabe?"

"Popularity warmeth my cold heart," says he. "Being of the committee, Henry Peck, I bows to superior wisdom. We'll proceed to the old Cross J, and take a lesson."

We stops at the Seeping Springs and has a nice drink—out of the jug. We starts out merrily along the road, when all to once Calamity starts to tell me a story. Calamity must have French blood in his carcass, 'cause he talks with his hands.

At least he might a picked out a flat place to do his gestures in, but as it was we hops off the road, down a hill, and pokes the front end of that machine into a mesquite bush. What part of it didn't plow through the bush jumped over.

I untangles myself from the brush and wanders over to the wagon. She don't seem hurt much, but her heart has quit beating.

"*Hyas cultus chuck, chick*," states a voice, and I turns to see old Running Wolf, a Piegan, squatting on his haunches, looking at that machine.

He's got a look on his face that Columbus might a had when he first saw the shores of our fair country.

"What did he say?" asks a weak voice, and Calamity appears from the other side of the car.

"He said, 'It's a mighty bad wagon,' " I interprets, and Calamity nods his head:

"That Injun ain't no danged idiot, Henry. Wonder if he'd like to take a ride?"

"*Mesika klatawa kopa chick, chick*?" I asks, but the old redskin puts his thumb up to his nose and wiggles his fingers at us.

"Nah-h-h-h-h!" he gargles, and points at his moccasins.

We manages to get that wagon back on the road. We drinks a toast to our good luck and to honest and cautious Injuns, and plods on up to the Cross J. I reckon our toasts covers too much territory, 'cause when Calamity opines to have me read his book of rules, all I can do is sing.

IT'S ALMOST dark when I wakes up. Beside me on the bunk is Calamity, snoring like a shepherd, so I sticks my boot into his ribs.

"Thanks," says he, after a look around. "Thanks, Henry. I was having a autymobilemare."

Just then in comes old man Whittaker. He looks around, sort of mad-like, and glares at me and Calamity.

"They don't seem to be here—gol dingle dangle it!" he yelps.

Me and Calamity looks around and shakes our heads.

"No," says I. "They must a left."

"They never went alone!" he howls. "That fancy, lodge war-bonnet and them striped pants never went away alone. I reckon I got to kill somebody!"

He slams the door, as he goes out, and Calamity looks at me.

"What's the matter with him?" he asks. "He never recognized me, and I've knowed Whittaker for years and years."

"Crazy," says I. "He went crazy over fancy clothes. He don't know anybody any more, Calamity."

"Pshaw! I knowed he wasn't——"

We hears a voice at the door, and I yells, "Come in!" and in ambles Pole Cat Perkins. He's got a bundle under his arm, and he sets down on the bunk and grins at me and Calamity.

"Huh-Hen, I'm after your permission," says he.

"You've got it, Pole Cat. What yuh going to do with it?"

He unrolls that bundle and produces a yaller stove-pipe hat, dented and moth-eaten, and an old rusty sword. He balances that old hat on his ball-shaped head, and runs the sword along the palm of his left hand.

"Do I qualify, Mister Peck?" he asks.

"For certain places, Pole Cat. What's the idea?"

"Chuck gives me these habiliments and tells me that I'll have to get your permission to lead the pe-rade tomorrow. I admires the chance so much that I ain't lost no time in coming. Do I get it?"

"Pole Cat," says I, solemn-like, "you probably will. Let your judgment be your guiding star."

"Thanks, Henry. I bids yuh good afternoon."

"Better make it farewell," says I.

"Loco crop must be flourishing up here," observes Calamity. "Some smells worse than others, Henry."

"This one is named after his associates," says I, and just then somebody rides up to the door and I hears Harelip Hansen's voice. "Get behind the bunk!" I hisses at Calamity. "If Harelip sees you up here he never will leave."

"Howdy, Henry," says Harelip. "I'm glad to see yuh."

"I'm pleased to know that the sight of me makes folks glad," says I. "What yuh got on your mind and under your arm?"

He unrolls enough for me to see that he's got Whittaker's lodge clothes.

"Chuck told me I could wear these at the front end of that pe-rade tomorrow, but I'd have to see you first."

"What do yuh reckon to have me do—dress yuh?" I asks, and he grins all over his homely face.

"It'll be all right, will it?" he asks, and I nods and replies:

"You know best, Harelip. There's a divinity that shapes our ends."

"Uh-huh. I gives you thanks, Henry."

"I'll take 'em, Harelip," says I. "I may never have any use for them, but it will be something to remember yuh by, old trailer."

I watches him climb on his flea-bitten cayuse, and jog off down the road. Calamity is looking over my shoulder, and as Harelip drifts out of sight he yelps:

"Where's my autymobile, Henry? We left her right out there didn't we?"

We goes out and looks around. There's the tracks we made when we came in, and there's the tracks where it went out, and back down the road. Calamity scratches his head, and hitches up his pants.

"Henry," says he, "I'm sorry. What yuh going to lead that pe-rade in now?"

I simply shakes my head, and says to myself:

"That's going to be a well-led pe-rade. She's already got two front ends."

"Henry," says Calamity, pointing at the dust, "they just missed that gate-post as they goes out and they didn't get on to the road for a hundred yards. I'd opine that they ain't familiar with the thing."

"Was there anything left under the seat?" I asks.

"One two-gallon jug, Henry—and what was left in ours."

"There is much to look forward to, Calamity," says I. "Maybe we better take a shovel along. I hope they don't bust up your machine."

"Don't let that molest your heart strings, Henry. I been thinking for several days thay maybe she's going to be a fatal fad. Of course it's going to spoil my entry into Paradise. A person of my financial standing hadn't ought to enter his old home town except in a fitting equipage. Ain't I right, Henry?"

"Well," says I, "since the old man left with his buckskin team and rattle wagon, and some heartless hombre has turned loose every bronc on the place, there ain't no mode of locomotion in sight except them two burros up there at the cook-shack. Are yuh too proud to straddle a jackass, Calamity?'

"It'll soon be dark, Henry. Many a man has done things in the dark that he wouldn't do in the light. Let's equip the shameful things and be on our way."

We puts saddles on them long-eared things and pilgrims off down the road in the dusty dusk. When we comes opposite the Saunders place, I pulls up.

"Whow," says I. "I got a mission to perform. We got to have a Miss Columbus for your pe-rade, Calamity, and I got to bear her the news."

We goes up and knocks on her door, and informs her of the fact.

"My gosh, Henry!" says she. "I ain't got nothing to wear!"

"Ma'am," says Calamity, bowing low, "don't you let that worry yuh. A figure like yours don't need no clothes."

The door shuts off the conversation, and we wanders back to our trusty steeds.

"Calamity, you been a lot of help to me this evening," says I. "You sure cut our cinch with the widder Saunders."

"I'm prostrated with grief," orates the old pelican. "Anyway I don't see what Columbus has to do with my home-coming, Henry."

"I can't explain it to yuh, Calamity. You'd have to see it for yourself."

We pilgrims down to Paradise, and ties our steeds on a side street. There's a scarcity of rolling stock in sight, and it makes me wonder a heap. Usually yuh can see broncs tied all over town, when a celebration is in prospect.

We pokes along up the street to Mike Pelly's saloon and goes inside. Mike is alone in there, setting at the end of the bar, with a shotgun beside him.

"What's the matter with Paradise?" I asks.

"Civilization," says Mike.

"Are we welcome?" asks Calamity, taking in the attitude of Mike, and sizing up the place.

"You are," replies Mike. "This place is neutral. I'd advise you to get out of line with that window. The town is divided against itself."

"What causes the divisions?" I asks, taking Mike's advice.

Mike bites off a fresh chew and settles back in his chair.

* * *

"NUMEROUS and sundry things, Henry. Old man Whittaker is setting up there in Henderson's barbershop, with a Winchester, swearing he's going to perforate Harelip Hansen, who is across the street in Dug Chaffin's corral, nursing a peeled nose and a six-shooter. The old man swears that Harelip stole his clothes.

"Pole Cat Perkins is behind my place here, trying to jam some lead into Scenery Sims before Scenery can slip some to him. It seems that their trouble grows out of a clothes controversy, too. Pole Cat avers that he's going to slit Scenery with a rusty sword.

"Doughgod Smith seems to be seeking Hank Padden's gore over something about Columbus' daughter, and Dug Chaffin's got the same thing against old man Whittaker and orates his intentions of puncturing the old man's hide for prevarication. Bill McFee refuses to arrest anybody except Scenery Sims, and his feelings seem some rasped over this same Columbus thing. Who in —— is Miss Columbus, Henry?"

"I don't know."

"You don't, eh?" laughs Mike. "The —— yuh don't! You sure ought to, Henry. Yuh sent notes to both of the Mudgett sisters, to Hulda Peterson, cook at the Triangle, Annie Schmidt, at the Seven A, and to Mrs. "Breezy" Benson, asking 'em to fill the part. Every one of them has been down here looking for you today. According to what I can find out there can't more than one be it, and that seems to cause a heap of dissatisfaction, Henry. Abe Mudgett and Breezy was here today, and they are wishful to see yuh."

"Henry," says Calamity, "you've overdone your duty."

"It would look thataway to a innocent bystander," I agrees. "Where's all the broncs, Mike? Did everybody walk in today?"

"That's where the civilization part comes in. A autymobile invades our fair city today, and she swept us clean of hossflesh. Out on them racks is fifteen pieces of rope flopping in the breeze. Old man Whittaker's buckskin team was in the lead the last we seen of the race. That's why nobody is leaving. They'd rather be shot at than walk."

"Who had the autymobile?" asks Calamity.

"Nobody knows. It went too fast for us to see."

"Hoo, hoo!" comes a voice from outside, and we all ducks. "Hoo, hoo!" she comes again, and then we hears a female voice, "Is Mister Peck in there?"

"Go out and see who it is," I whispers to Mike, but he shakes his head:

"Not me. She wants you, Henry."

"She can take it out in wanting. I don't take no chances. You go out, Calamity. Nobody's got a thing against you."

Calamity thinks it over, and then goes out all humped like he was suffering from kidney disease. Me and Mike lays low, and pretty soon Calamity comes sneaking back.

"It was that female person we went up to see," he states. "She wishes to forgive me, and wants me to tell you that she'll take up your offer, Henry. She'll be Miss Columbus."

"Another victim," grunts Mike. "You're a bigger liar than Chuck Warner."

"He done it for me," defends Calamity. "Henry wanted to make my homecoming a complete success, and it ain't all his fault if it don't exactly work out. When a man has a pe-rade given in his honor he can't kick if some of the details do get a little balled up."

"In your honor?" wonders Mike, out loud. "Are you Fourth of July, Mister?"

"Fourth of July?" Calamity looks at me and Mike, and then seems to dig deep-like into his memory for buried information.

While he seems to check off some numbers on his fingers, I edges toward the back door. He nods, sort of agreeable-like, chaws one side of his mustache, and fingers his waistline, where his gun makes a bulge.

"Fourth of July," he mutters. "Uh-huh. That's right. Henry Peck told me——"

I opens the door, easy-like, and misses the rest of the complaint.

"Now," says I to me, "you're branded as a liar, Henry Peck. The best thing you can do is to get your little jackass and go home. Your forefathers never fought for glorious freedom, so there ain't no use of you celebrating the happy event. The men who were responsible for the Pecks' family tree was all hung for lying and stealing long before the Declaration of Independence was signed."

With these few cheering words ringing in my windpipe I ambles around the corner, and down to where we left them burros. I gets there just in time. Scenery Sims is untying one of my trusty animiles, so I quickens my pace and shoves a gun in his ribs.

"Unhand that charger!" I roars in his ear, and Scenery wilts against the hitchrack. "You danged burro thief!" I hisses. "If you wants to lead that pe-rade—go get your own rolling stock."

"I—I—I dud-don't want to le-lead nothing but the sus-simple life," he stutters. "I want to go home, Henry. Pup-Pole Cat shot the back out of my suspenders, and stuck a bullet into the cylinder of my gun so she won't work. I'm through, Hen. You lead it."

Here comes somebody down the street toward us, puffing like a bronc with the heaves. He lopes up to us, sticks his heels into the ground and skids around to the opposite side of the burros. It is old man Whittaker.

"Quick!" he pants. "I'm rushed to death."

Then he begins to fuss with a tie rope.

"Is speed essential?" I asks, and he snorts. "You know it is! I'm out of shells—got more at the ranch. Dang the man what tied this rope!"

Just then somebody fires a shot up the

street and I don't hesitate. I hops on to that Rocky Mountain canary, sets my spurs into his hide, and down the street we goes, frog-hopping, high, wide and handsome. A bullet plows under my steed, and he sails out of Paradise faster than any burro ever did before or since.

We keep up that speed for about a mile, and then slows down to a amble. I know where a pack-trail leaves the main road, a mile or so above where the road does, so I opines to take the shortest route to the Cross J. I leads my animile, while I searches for the trail in the dark, and all to once I hears voices down the road. I hears Muley's bass and Chuck's baritone, a cross between a greaseless wheel and pneumonia, raised in song—

"'It was at Aunt Dinah's quilting partee-e-e-e——'"

Then Telescope's tenor rings in—

"'I was see-e-e-e-eing Nellie-e-e-e home.'"

"Tha's harmonee," I hears Chuck opine. "Le's all shing 'Holy City.' 'Lash night as I lay sheeping—shay, Teleschope, why don't this machine go on, eh?"

"How do I know," replies Telescope. "Shomebody light 'nother match so I can read the reashon in the little book."

"Aw, who cares?" asks Muley. "Let's have more cheer—listen:

"I love a little lager beer,
I love a little wine;
A little bit a alcohol
Makes my heart feel fine.
But when I want a reg'lar drink,
To make my feelings hug,
I take a little snifter
From the old brown jug."

I sets there and listens to that kind of a conversation for a while. They tries to sing another song, but she don't finish, and after a while I wanders down and looks 'em over.

CHUCK is in the bottom of the machine, with his boots hanging over the dashboard, while Telescope is doubled up in the seat, with his feet on Chuck's head. Muley is on the ground, with his head through a space in a front wheel, where some spokes are missing, and he's snoring by note.

I rolls him away from the machine. I gives Telescope a gentle shove, hangs on to his leg so he won't hit too hard and deposits him along with Muley. Chuck is wedged in there pretty tight, and when I opines to loosen him a little he orates something about wanting his maw to wake him up, 'cause he's going to be queen of the May. I never did like to ride alone, so I lets him stay. It pains me to see the flower of young manhood in the gutter of alcohol thataway. I finds the jug, and am glad to see that part of it is still there.

I drinks what would measure about three inches in a wash-tub, before I remembers how Calamity runs that machine, but all to once she comes back to me. I sets that brake, gives her a mighty twist, and away she goes, *whirrup*, *whirrup*, *whirrup*, *zuz*, *zuz*, *zuz*, *zuz*.

I've rode a lot of broncs that didn't sabe the meaning of a bit, but that thing was less bridlewise than anything I ever seen. We grinds back toward Paradise, smelling of burnt grease, gasoline and so forth. I takes another look into that jug, and feels so elevated that I puts my feet over the dashboard. Somehow that seems to give the critter more freedom, and we goes faster.

I gets so expert right away that I can drive one-handed, and I discovers a little jigger on the handle that will make her prick up her ears at a touch. I gives her a few touches, and marvels at how fast the mesquite goes past, when all to once I hears a yelp, and we hits something or somebody, and when I stops I'm cross ways of the road.

My machine is as dead as a nail. Pretty soon I hears a rustling noise in the dark, and then old man Whittaker's voice:

"Who run into me? Gol dingle dang yuh! Blasted mule couldn't run faster than I could! Hey, you feller with a autymobile! Ain't yuh got no sense? Gol dang your soul, I'll show yuh how yuh can run me down! *Bang!*"

He cut loose with that six-gun, and I drops out the other side and sneaks behind a tree.

I hears the old man cussing some more, and pretty soon he finds the machine and strikes a match. He has to light the second one before he finds what he's looking for. He holds the match above his head for a minute and then wails:

"Gol dang yuh, Chuck! Why didn't yuh speak? Aw ——! Chuckie, where did I hit yuh? Can't yuh speak to a feller? Are yuh dead? My ——!"

He's silent for a spell, and then he starts again:

"Where's that danged slow-footed mule? Here yuh are, yuh long-eared snail! Got to get a doctor. Self-defense—nope, accident. Whoa! Maybe his neck is broke, too. Aw, this ain't no way to celebrate nohow."

He pilgrims off up the road, complaining about everything and cussing that mule for taking him all over the State instead of straight to the Cross J. I'd opine that the old man was so excited that he'd taken the wrong road out of town.

I hauls the front end of that machine around again, and winds her up. If that front end hadn't been against a rock my obituary would have been written right there in the dusty road, 'cause she's wide open, with no brake set. She's backing and filling when I hops aboard, and we begins our merry ride once more.

I rubs my heel on Chuck's ear and yells:

"Chuck, you're dead! Old man Whittaker shot yuh."

"Tha's good," he replies. "Same to you and many of 'em."

We runs slow-like to Paradise, and I bumps the front end of the machine into McFee's corral to stop her. I gives Chuck an alcoholic anesthetic, and leaves him there. I ambles over to the town, and finds a crowd in front of Mike's place. I moves up closer and hears the conversation.

"It was deplorable," I hears old man Whittaker state, with tears in his voice. "I loved Chuck like he was my own son. It was a accident, Bill—just accidental. You don't think I'd kill him with malice aforethought, do yuh, Bill?"

"We can tell better what yuh killed him with after we sees the re-mains," replies Bill. "I can't help jailing yuh, Whit. It's the law. If you're innocent, yuh ain't got nothing to fear. I got Scenery Sims down there now, so yuh won't get lonesome."

"What did Scenery do?" asks the old man.

"Disturbed the peace. This place is law-abiding, if yuh asks me. Just for the looks of the thing we'll take Doc Milliken along, while we gets your victim's body. Where did yuh say this here dastardly deed was done?"

"It wasn't dastardly!" whoops the old man. "It was accidental, I tell yuh! It happens near where the old pack-trail leaves the main road. You know where that is?"

"I know. Wait a minute, fellers, and I'll be with yuh."

He takes the old man and goes off down toward the jail, and when he comes back they all gets in that wagon and rattles off down the road. The old man must a been rattled, 'cause it happens a long ways this side of the pack-trail end. That's where I leaves Muley and Telescope.

Mike and Calamity stands there on the porch as the wagon leaves, and I hears Mike yell at Bill:

"Hey, Bill! Be sure and get back before sunrise on account of them salutes."

"What salutes is them?" asks Calamity.

"Bill's got 'em down in the jail. He's got five ten-gallon kerosene cans full of water down there, and in each can is six sticks of dynamite, wrapped in canvas and covered with axle-grease. They're all ready to touch off. Some salute, eh? Now, if Bill's late we won't have our sunrise salute."

They goes back inside. I looks at my watch, and sees that it's danged near morning, and at the same time I gets a happy idea. I ambles back to the autymobile, and finds Chuck setting on the seat, holding his head in his hands.

"Henry," says he, "how came I here, and why am I so dry?"

"I brought yuh here, Chuck, and I hid the jug under the wagon."

I gives him a shock and he gets enthusiastic.

"Chuck," says I, "would yuh like to hear a big, big noise?"

"That's the idea, Henry—a great big noise. Can't be too big. Where yuh going to get it?"

I tells him about them loaded cans down at the jail, and he's for me. We enthuses over the jug a little more, and then goes down to the jail. I posts Chuck about a hundred feet from the jail, and tells him to watch for anybody coming from town.

THE Paradise jail ain't much. It's one story, mostly dobe, and stands way out from any other shack, a grim reminder that there still is law and order—at times. A strong man might kick the walls loose if they wasn't afraid the roof would fall on 'em. I takes a rock and busts the padlock. There's only one cell in the place, and when I lights a match I sees the faces of Scenery Sims and the old man.

I busts the lock off the cell door, and lets 'em out.

"Vamoose!" I whispers. "Get a-going. We don't want no lynching in Paradise on the Fourth of July."

"But, Henry—" squeaks Scenery.

"No time for argument!" I snaps. "You'll find out later. Go fast and far. Sabe?"

"I'll make this right with you, Henry," says the old man, earnest-like, and I nods in the dark and says to myself—

"You'll likely try."

They slips out together, and in about a minute I hears Chuck come up to the door, and he seems peevish over something.

"Hen!" he whispers. "Aw, Hen! Henry Peck!"

I don't say nothing, and pretty soon he remarks, sad-like:

"Drunk. Saw two Henry Pecks go away from here. Must be drunk as a boiled owl."

He goes out of hearing, complaining to himself about the effects of alcohol on the optic nerves.

I takes the dynamite out of them cans and puts it in one pile on the floor. Bill must a been afraid of that stuff, 'cause he's got about ten minutes' worth of extra fuse.

I runs the fuse out the door, puts the padlock back in place, and touches her off. I goes back up to Mike's place but don't go in. Mike and Calamity are playing cards, while they waits for Chuck's body to arrive, so I goes over and climbs up on the hitchrack. I gets up there, and gets right down. Comes a rumble and a shake, the town is lit up for a second, and then it begins to rain pieces of jail all over town. Thirty sticks of dynamite is some little dwelling-mover.

Mike and Calamity staggers out on the porch, and gazes at the world.

"What do yuh reckon it was?" gasps Calamity.

"Dynamite!" yells Mike. "There's —— to pay and no pitch hot!"

"Bill McFee insisted on leaving that stuff in the jail until it was time to touch it off, and he done put old man Whittaker and Scenery Sims in there—and—they both smoke!"

"Gosh all hemlock!" wails Calamity. "There ain't a thing we can do, is there, Mike?"

"Nothing. When you're near thirty sticks of dynamite, and she goes off, there ain't nothing that anybody can do—not even the coroner."

They don't much more than get inside, when I hears the rattle of wheels, and into Paradise comes the ambulance. They swings around in front of the place and stops. Out comes Mike and Calamity.

"Was he dead?" asks Mike, and we hears McFee snort:

"Old man Whittaker must be crazy! We couldn't find Chuck nor the autymobile. All we found was Muley and Telescope, setting along the road trying to sing. They don't know about no shooting scrape. Whittaker is a danged old liar!"

"Don't speak disrespectable of the dead," advises Calamity. "No matter how a man acted in this vale of tears yuh hadn't ought to besmirch his memory with recriminations."

"He ain't dead, I tell yuh!" yelps Bill.

"Well," says Mike, "if he ain't he's made of iron. No man can stand a shock like that and ever be the same."

"Shock? Who do yuh mean—Chuck?"

"No," says Mike, sad-like. "I mean Whittaker."

"And Scenery Sims," adds Calamity, removing his hat. "They must a threw a match on to a fuse. The padlock came through the back door, and is sticking in Mike's bar."

There's complete silence for a while, and then McFee gasps—

"My ——!"

He yanks the team around, and away he goes, rattlety bang, down toward the jail, while the crowd races along behind him. Muley and Telescope sets there on the steps and finishes up their song.

"Ret-ret-retribution," pronounces Telescope. "The old man kills Chuck, and then gets hoist with his own petard."

"Hoisted," corrects Muley. "I never heard dynamite called petard but a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Some celebration, eh, Telescope. I wonder if anybody has yet killed Henry Peck this fair morning?"

"The day is yet young, so why worry?" says Telescope. "I fain wouldst look upon the red when it is wine. Let's tend a little bar, Muley."

I wanders around back of Mike's place. I feels weary, and when I notices Mike's little barn, I gets an inspiration. Why not sleep until celebration time? I climbs into the loft and sprawls on the hay.

"All the comforts of home," says I out loud.

"Hey, Henry," comes a whisper. "Was Chuck dead?"

"Uh-huh," says I. "Is Scenery with yuh?"

"He is," squeaks Scenery. "What was that explosion, Henry?"

"They say that Harelip and Pole Cat blew up the jail. I don't know how much truth there is in it."

"Henry," quavers the old man, "you was a friend in need. I'll——"

Just then a faint voice begins singing, somewhere in the hay. It's a voice that nobody ever heard and forgot. Cross between a greaseless wheel and pneumonia.

"'Rockuhvages clef' for me-e-e, le' me hide myself——'"

We listens for a few seconds. Old man Whittaker gathers his legs under himself like a rabbit, and shoots out a that hay-loft like a swaller. We hears him hit the ground and gallop out of range. Scenery don't say a word. He yawns, crawls over to the window, and lets himself down, easy-like, and sneaks away.

"Henry," says Chuck, "did I hear your voice?"

"You did."

"Stop talking to yourself, you shepherd, and let a man sleep. I had a awful dream, Henry. Dreamed that the world blowed up. It hit me and—ho, hum-m-m!"

"Ho, hum-m-m-m!" says I, and goes to sleep, too.

WHEN I woke up the birds were singing, and the sun was shining through the cracks in the loft. Chuck is still snoring, so I climbs down alone. I'm as dry as a drouth in Arizona, so I pilgrims into Mike's place regardless of consequences.

The place is fairly filled, and sadness is the prevailing color scheme. On the bar stands Scenery's old stove-pipe hat, with a wide band of black cloth around it, and Mike's mirror is hung with the emblem of mourning.

McFee is standing there with bowed head, and sadness fairly drips from his lips.

"It's a most awful situation," he orates. "If we could only find a single piece of 'em. There ain't nothing left—nothing!"

"There ain't nothing left of poor Chuck either," tolls Muley. "Poor old Chuck. He was a gentleman and a scholar. I'd love to gaze upon his face once more.

"He's went away and left us
  In the prime of his young life.
He's gone from this here vale of tears
  With all it's joy and strife.
No more we'll see his banty legs,
  Nor hear him tell a lie.
He's vanished from old Paradise,
  And we never said good-by."

"That's a mighty pretty thing, Muley," applauds Pole Cat. "Can't yuh think of something nice to say for old man Whittaker?"

"The rest of you fellers stand back from Pole Cat and Harelip, and old man Whittaker will say something for himself," states a voice at the door, and there stands the old man, with a shotgun which he levels at Pole Cat and Harelip.

The crowd obeys. Bill McFee's legs get so weak that he sets down on the bar-rail where he gasps like a fish out of water.

"You danged pair of dynamiters!" snaps the old man. "With the shadder of the gallows staring me in the eye, and Chuck Warner's ghost haunting my dreams, I comes back to show yuh that your dastardly deed failed. When yuh blowed up that jail yuh didn't get me and Scenery. Sabe? Shut up!" he snaps, as Harelip starts to say something. "Don't try to deny it, Harelip. I can prove it by the heero what let us out. There he stands, gents. Henry Clay Peck. He busted the lock and liberated——"

The crowd turns to look at me, but I don't seem to be the point of interest at that. They looks right past me. Old man Whittaker's gun slips from his hands, and clangs on the floor. I twists my neck and looks behind me, and there stands Chuck. He yawns and leans against the pool-table.

"Well," says Chuck, in a dry voice, "ain't somebody going to set 'em up? Sleeping in timothy makes a feller dry."

Bill McFee looks at Chuck and back at Whittaker and the tears of joy runs out of his eyes. Whittaker leans against the door and tries to laugh, but he can't.

"Haw!" says Harelip, but that's as far as he got.

Chuck ambles up to the bar, and looks 'em over.

"Holy henhawks!" he snorts. "Have yuh all gone loco?"

"Ain't—ain't yuh dead, Chuck?" stutters the old man.

"Almost—from thirst."

Bill McFee has been looking, steady-like, at me for some time, and when he gets on his feet he sort of starts edging toward me. I edges the other way, sort of unconcerned-like, and bumps into Calamity. He's got a billiard cue in his hands.

"Henry," he whispers, "you lied to me."

I nods, kicks his feet out from under him, and goes out of that back door like a shot. I races around to the front, and runs into something. They're grouped, and I'm into 'em before I has time to think.

There's the two Mudgett sisters, Hulda Peterson, Annie Schmidt, Mrs. Benson, Maggie Smith, Clarice Chaffin and the widder Saunders. The male members of the vigilance committee is Abe Mudgett and Breezy Benson.

"We've been waiting for you, Henry," states the widder, sort of belligerent-like, and the chorus sings the last four words.

"We're looking for a little explanation from you," states Breezy Benson, and Abe nods—

"We desires the same."

"Exactly," says I. "In the course of human e-vents——"

"Grab that dynamiter!" yells McFee, from the front door, and Breezy tried to foller instructions. Anybody that reaches out to grasp old man Peck's loving son Henry, in times of stress, is in continuous danger. Breezy got it on the jaw, and yours truly went away from there with the enraged citizens on the trail.

Never again do I sic a pack of hounds after a coyote. What few broncs are in town are immediate and soon rode after me, and I sure have a plenty to attend to. I got a good start, but I know I can't keep it forever. I'm hopping off down a washout, when I happens to see McFee's corral. I gets an idea right there.

The gang is quite a ways behind me, trying to make me come out of a old shack, so I takes a chance and races for that corral. The autymobile is pointed the wrong way, and I ain't got no time to turn it around. I yanks the front wheels around, sets the brake, grabs the crank and prays. *Bingo!* She took it the first turn. I yanks off the brake, and away I goes, straight for the posse.

I yanks the little jigger down and we sure hits for Paradise in a hurry. They scatters at my approach, swings in behind me, and up the main street of Paradise we goes, strung out for a quarter of a mile and stretching all the time.

That machine was a humdinger as long as I'm in danger, but when I leaves 'em far behind she lays down and quits like a yaller pup. I sets there and looks around, and out into the road wanders three saddled broncs. I ducks, thinking they're some of the posse, but a second look tells me that they're some of the broncs what left Paradise yesterday, when the autymobile first came in.

One Cross J bronc has a long rope dragging, so I catches him and then ropes the other two. I strings out across the hills toward home, puts 'em in the home corral, and goes to bed. I reckon it's almost morning when the Cross J bunch gets home. Muley, Telescope, Chuck and the old man all comes into the bunk-house, but they don't see me.

"Ho, hum-m-m-m!" yawns the old man. "I'm glad to be home. This has been one strenuous holiday, fellers."

"She sure has," agrees Telescope. "That pe-rade was a humdinger."

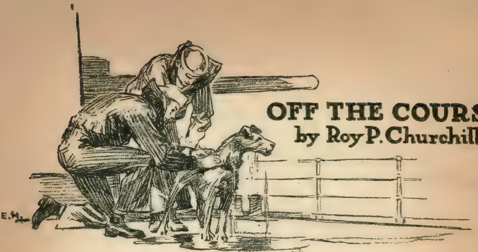
I sets up in bed and looks 'em over.

"Pe-rade?" I asks. "Did they have a pe-rade?"

"Yes, little one," replied Muley. "We had a pe-rade that we'll date time from. We had eight Miss Columbuses and——"

"Who—who led it?" I asks.

"You did, you danged fool!" whooped Telescope.



OFF THE COURSE

by Roy P. Churchill

Author of "The Welding," "A Shift Into Reverse," etc.

AS THE steam-launch shoved off from the protecting sides of the cruiser *Glouster*, the fog swallowed her up in a couple of boat lengths, but failed to soften or hide the growing enmity between two members of her crew. Kirk Morton, the coxswain, stood with his hands on the steering wheel, and his eyes on the dancing needle of the compass, as he guided the launch through the ghostly vapor which shut the little boat and its crew of five into a world apart. Outside on the boat's small deck in the bowman's place Singleton Smith, until recently known as "Hobo" Smith, balanced himself on bare widespread toes, holding his boat-hook with one hand, and the launch's canopy with the other, while he peered forward into the gray wall ahead.

But the thoughts of these two men were little taken up with their work. Their closeness to one another, despite the duty in hand, was almost an overwhelming irritant. Kirk Morton was a master hand at the wheel of the steam-launch—nicknamed the *"Jumping Jack"*—and he had brought her out when waves threatened to drown the fire by way of the smoke stack; and maneuvered alongside the ship when an error of an ounce of pressure on the wheel, or a second of time, would have smashed her like an egg against the side.

But coupled with this expertness was a certain habit of smuggling aboard a couple of bottles of native drink for the use of himself and friends. This morning, on account of it, he had been compelled to ask for a relief bowman, and as usual, Smith had been detailed.

"Can't you give me some one else, sir?" he complained to the officer of the deck as the cargo was loaded. "This fellow's no good." And the officer had looked at him coldly without reply.

"And the dog, too?" grumbled Morton, pointing to the first division's mascot already curled up on one of the boxes in the stern sheets.

"Yes," said the officer in a tone which meant that Morton had gone as far as he dared. "Shove off and let's hear no more."

So it was that Kirk Morton not only carried Hobo Smith, but Smith's dog, Arab, a full-grown shaggy Airedale, whose home from puppyhood had been the forecastle of the *Glouster*, and whose friends were Smith's friends in the exact ratio of that relationship, for true to his breed, Arab was loyal and Smith was master supreme. He lay now between Smith's widespread feet with his head on his paws, and his alert brown eyes searching the fog bank ahead with every acute instinct. Smith raised one of his feet and stroked across the shaggy head, and Arab smiled up at him with a wave of his tail.

Unconscious of the obtrusion, the end of the tail settled back across Kirk Morton's view of the compass, and with an exclamation of anger, he struck down across it cruelly with the hard edge of his open hand. He had expected a yelp of pain, but Arab did not cry out. Instead, he reversed instantly, and his long-jawed, wicked muzzle appeared in Morton's face. The dog knew his enemies as well as his friends, and his lips were drawn back from his white keen teeth, and his soft brown eyes had become bright points of yellow flame.

Morton jumped back as Smith's restraining hand was laid on Arab. One vicious snap of the jaws had come uncomfortably close to his face.

"You'd better hold him," he told Smith, and turned to the fireman behind him. "Give me that short slice bar. I'll fix this —— pup so he won't be so anxious to take a bite out of a fellow. What he needs is a few manners."

"Let the dog alone," said Smith, leaning over and putting his head under the canopy. "What did you want to pinch his tail for? He wasn't hurting you."

One of the hardest things that Arab had to learn as he grew to full strength was that his friends, and even his master, preferred sometimes to fight without help from him. This was one of the times. Smith had dragged him back and told him to lie on the deck. Waves of hatred surged through him and kept the hair on his back in a bristle, but to make doubly sure that this time he was not to interfere, his master called to the sternman on the launch—

"Keep Arab out of this, will you, Jimmy?"

At the same time Kirk Morton was saying, as he rang to shut off the engine and climbed out on deck:

"We'll settle this thing now. The dog gets a licking, and it just suits me to start on you." Shut in by the fog, and safe from interference, it was Morton's opportunity to show Smith his place. "I'll make this boat too hot a place for any trimming upstart to light on, trying to take a man's billet away from him."

This was Morton's real grievance. Smith had been the joke of the ship, a dirty, unredeemed tramp, and after a bitter struggle, helped immeasurably by the Airedale puppy, he had fought back to manhood. Morton's words brought the hot blood to Smith's face. It was not his fault that the coxswain was becoming unreliable, and to be called a trimmer—an officer's pet—was deadly insult to any sailor. He took a step forward with fists clenched, and Morton met him with a blow.

The two men were evenly matched in size, but Morton had the advantage of having his back to the canopy, and the comparatively secure footing of the widest portion of the small deck, while Smith had to balance himself further forward, where one step either way or behind him would put him overboard. Thus it was that he could not well dodge Morton's blow, so he parried and clenched to keep from being forced off the deck. Straining and whirling, locked in each other's arms, the two stumbled over Smith's discarded boat-hook and fell to the deck, Morton on top.

Arab whimpered under the restraining hand of the sternman, but knew that until his master called him, he must keep out. With a mighty heave Smith strained upward to get the advantage, and the men rolled back to the wide part of the deck just over the steering wheel.

"Look out, you two!" yelled "Fatty" Walters, the engineer, and made a frantic grab for the compass.

He was too late. The instrument was upset, rolled to the side of the boat, and fell overboard.

For several precious seconds they continued struggling while Walters secured a boat-hook, and made ineffectual jabs which only succeeded in turning the compass over and sinking it lower in the water, as still afloat in its small wooden box, it bobbed out of reach and disappeared in the fog, for the launch was still going ahead of its momentum.

"Cut it out!" appealed the engineer, turning his boat-hook on the fighting men. "You've kicked the compass overboard!"

With the full meaning of the loss gaining a place in their wrought up minds, Smith and Morton sat up.

"It'll float," said Morton between pants, as he scrambled back into the cockpit and rang for full speed. "We'll pick it up. Which way did it go?"

The fireman pointed, and turning in a swift arc the launch cut back into the fog. After five minutes of fruitless circling, Morton was ready to give up.

"It's gone down," he announced sullenly. "We'll have to go on without it."

"We ought to signal the ship with the whistle and go back to her for a new compass," said Smith.

"I'm running this launch," said Morton. "Keep your mouth out," and he turned the boat in what he thought was the general direction of the shore and went ahead at full speed.

Yet Smith's protest had been well taken, for the boat was loaded to her full capacity with rifle ammunition for the landing party ashore, and the search for the compass was enough to bewilder any sense of direction.

THE landing force from the *Glouster* had first taken possession of the Haitian port's custom house, and gradually widened its sphere of influence until it controlled the bay on which the town was built. But this bay was divided by a point of land from a smaller one, which had only a rude cluster of native huts on its protected shore-line, but which was still in command of the revolutionists.

The sides of this bay were mountainous and thick-grown with jungle vegetation, and after a couple of attacks when the landing force had found the houses deserted by all except the women and children, the sailors had adopted the easier policy of letting the remnants of revolutionary bands driven from the larger town gather there unmolested to grow tired of the unequal struggle and return to peaceful pursuits, cut off as they were from all supplies, particularly ammunition.

But Kirk Morton knew that the blame for the loss of the compass would rest on him, even though it had been Smith's foot which had sent it overboard, for he was in charge and had started the fight, but he hoped to have this offset somewhat if he could deliver his cargo without delay, and so he meant to take a chance.

After a time Smith spoke again. He was standing as far forward as he could balance himself, peering intently ahead, and the Airedale stood at his side with every muscle and nerve alert.

"It don't sound right," he said, and despite the anger which leaped over him at Morton's sneer, he continued, "we would be out of luck if we hit the upper bay instead of the one we control. You know the shore is steeper on that side, and it would make the engine sounds different."

The other men of the crew were interested if Morton was not, and Smith kept on.

"Look at the dog. See how he's all bristled up. He senses something strange about where we are."

"Bosh!" scoffed Morton, and kept ahead, beginning to be worried under his mask of indifference, but too proud and too contemptuous of Hobo Smith to acknowledge that he might be wrong.

The fog seemed to be thicker than ever, and stubbornly the coxswain drove the little boat on through it. His first warning of the seriousness of the boat's danger was seeing Hobo Smith and Arab as they stood on the bow go plunging forward overboard, as the boat's keel scraped on the first outlying branches of a coral reef, and came to a sudden stop among the spongy dripping mass, being not seriously damaged, and almost on an even keel, but stuck hard and fast.

And then Kirk Morton in a moment of panic did a very foolish thing. He ordered the engineer to back her at full speed, and the continued thrash of the screw in its ineffectual attempt to pull the boat off made noise enough to be heard on the close-lying shore, and advertised that the boat was in trouble.

"Pull the whistle cord," advised Smith. "Perhaps the ship will hear us."

"We'll lie still and see where we are, first," objected Morton. "Who knows whether we've hit the upper bay or not?" He had dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper, and continued: "There's been too much talking in the boat. Keep quiet, all of you."

Morton was so anxious to discount any suggestion of Smith's that his own judgment was warped.

At the end of ten minutes the engineer whispered a protest.

"The tide's going out, and we're getting stuck harder every minute. The fog looks like it's good for a week. Let's do something."

But Morton shook his head.

"You fellows give me a pain," he said. "If we're in the upper bay, blowing the whistle will only bring the rebels down on us, and if we're on our side, we will be laughed at for a bunch of boobs. Be game and stick it out."

Thus appealed to, the engineer gave up and went back to wiping his engine with a piece of waste.

"Keep that dog quiet, or choke him," ordered Morton, as Arab strained forward over the bow with a low growl.

The dog's keen ears had caught the sound of a stealthy oar, and fifty yards in front of them the ghostly shape of a native dugout appeared. After being challenged and allowed to advance under cover of the crew's revolvers, the boat contained only two harmless-appearing native women with a scanty assortment of fruit, which they held up for sale.

"Just like I told you," said Morton with assurance. "We've hit shore somewhere inside our own bay, and you fellows all excited, wanting to blow the whistle and raise Ned generally!"

Then with signs and his scanty supply of native jargon, he bought some of the fruit, and asked that help be sent out from shore to pull the boat off. The black beady eyes of the two women took in every detail of the boat's predicament, and the nature of its cargo, while they shrugged and chattered and seemed to try to make out Morton's instructions. Then abruptly they disappeared in the fog.

Morton was well pleased with himself. There seemed a good chance now of getting the boat off the reef and the cargo safely ashore without having to ask for help, with its embarrassing explanations, from the ship. But the rest of the crew were not so optimistic. Smith at least was uneasy. for Arab gave almost constant signs of the presence of enemies.

"Smells some dog ashore," said Morton.

But Smith did not answer the thrust, for Arab had run to the other end of the boat away from shore, and seemed puzzled and disturbed. As they watched, from near at hand in the fog bank came a dozen rifle shots, and two of the bullets went through the launch's canopy. A few seconds afterward from the other side of the boat, but further off, came a like fusillade of shots.

"They're all around us!" said Fatty Walters, as he and the fireman strapped on their revolver belts and crouched down in the waist of the boat. The other members of the crew were already armed. "Guess there's no argument now about where we are, or what we're up against."

"They'll hear the shots out on the ship," said Morton hopefully.

"You're a bum guesser," said the engineer. "Get busy with the whistle cord, like you should have long ago. Firing don't mean anything to the ship. Somebody is always doing a little shooting on shore."

Smith and Arab had taken their places for defense in the stern of the boat behind the ammunition cases with Jimmy Wood, the sternman, while the coxswain's place was in the bow.

As Morton took the whistle cord to commence his belated signaling, the first of the attacking canoes was so close in to the bow that he had to let go and crouch in the cockpit again as he emptied his revolver to repel boarders. Two natives armed with rifles fired rapidly from the small boat, while their craft was sent swiftly along by two other men at the oars. Canoe after canoe did this.

The launch crew would catch a fleeting glimpse of a boat as it came in sight, and vanished in the fog, and get in a few shots at each moving target, some of which were hits, while the natives, seeing the larger bulk of the launch better, riddled the canopy and smokestack and upper sides with bullets.

One of these shots going too high to do any damage to the boat's crew proved a luckier chance blow for the attackers than if it had struck a man, for it took overboard the small brass steam whistle secured to the smokestack, and destroyed the launch's only means of communication with the *Glouster*. The fireman cursed Morton's stubbornness in not using the whistle sooner, as he shut off the valve to stop the escaping steam, and at the same time the natives changed tactics and rushed the launch from all sides at once.

Despite the best efforts of the defenders, they seemed determined to take the boat by storm, thinking perhaps that the quick move of the fireman and the hiss of steam meant disaster. But at close range the deadly automatics of the five sailors were terribly effective, as they stood up at their places and emptied the revolvers as swiftly as they could push in the fresh clips.

THE attack collapsed, but not until the defenders had paid their toll, as well. Jimmy Wood had a bullet in the left shoulder, Morton had a nasty head wound from a splinter of the deck planking, and a bullet had plowed across the engineer's cheek in a deep, painful furrow. Smith and the fireman had escaped.

"I don't want many more like that," said Walters, as he sank wearily into his seat by the engine, and let the fireman tie on a first-aid bandage.

Smith was busy with Wood, while Morton managed to bandage his own wound.

"The ship's bound to miss us and send a rescue party," said the fireman hopefully.

"Sure," answered the pessimistic engineer. "She'll wait an hour at least, for a report from shore, and then she'll wireless in. After that when they locate the C.O. the landing party will make a report. Then they'll begin to get busy and then get ready, and then start. Where do you think they'll go? Who's going to put them next to where we are? In this fog they'll have to find us before they rescue us.

"We've got to hold on," said Morton, "until they do come."

"You can bet it's hold on," agreed the engineer. "You know what happens to a poor boob that's captured by these spiggoties."

"We might signal with revolver shots," suggested Smith. "Maybe they could pick the shots out, now that it's quiet again."

"It's a bright scheme," said Morton sarcastically. "What made it take you so long to think of it? But jar your brains a little. At three miles the sound would be mighty faint, even if they caught it at all, and we would have to repeat it over and over, and not be interrupted by any shots from another point while we were doing it. Then, you know," he continued, making the explanation childishly simple, so that Smith would get the full back-kick from his blunder, "even if the stern sheets is full of ammunition, you don't see any rifles aboard, do you? And all the revolver ammunition we have is what's left in our belts. Any more brilliant suggestions?"

A soft bump against the launch's side interrupted further talk. The men leaned over the side with pistols ready, but only an empty native boat had bumped alongside. It was a third full of water and its blood-stained thwarts gave evidence of what had happened.

"I didn't think they would tackle it again for awhile," said Morton with relief, as he dropped his automatic back into its holster.

"I remember that boat," said the fireman, as the dugout began to drift away, "because it was such a small one. One man was firing and one rowing. They got in close and Jimmy Wood got them both before they fixed him."

Smith took a boat-hook and pulled the craft alongside. The boat seemed undamaged, and this discovery had suggested a plan. He ignored Morton's growl to let the boat alone, and turned to the fireman.

"What do you use for a bailer?" he asked.

"What're you up to?" challenged Morton.

"Wait and see," said Smith, turning on him furiously. "But don't try to stop me."

Morton had provoked his temporary bowman to the limit, and the same Smith who had come to the defense of his dog, and who had refused to let the coxswain's sarcasm and criticism keep him from making suggestions for the welfare of the boat, faced him now defiantly, ready to fight if he had to, to carry out his plan.

"I'm the boss here, temporized Morton. "I'm the coxswain."

"Let's not argue," cut in Smith. "It was your pig-headed stubbornness in going on without a compass that got us into this fix. I'm going to bail out this boat and go after help. It's the quickest way to tell the ship that we're in trouble, and where we are."

With the fireman's tin bucket which he used to scrub clothes, Smith let himself carefully down into the small boat, and began to empty it of water.

"Let him go," said Morton to the engineet. "These spiggoties are all around us thick, laying for a move like this. What the coward is thinking of is a chance to get away with a whole skin himself."

Smith had straightened up, his task finished, and heard the last remark.

"You go then," he offered Morton, restraining the hot words which came to his lips, but leaving his fists clenched. "Can't you see that if we don't use this chance to go for help it means not only death to us, but to dozens of our shipmates if the natives capture the ammunition? Who goes doesn't make any difference, just so somebody does go."

His earnestness had an effect on Morton, who answered sullenly:

"The chances are better here. They're sure to get anybody that makes a dash for the ship. Your best chance is to stay and fight it out with us."

"I'll go, then," said Smith, as he unstrapped his ammunition belt, and handed it over. "I'll keep what's in the gun," he said.

Then giving the word to the eager Airedale, who jumped down beside him, Smith took up the paddle, and shoved silently off into the gray wall of fog.

In half a dozen strokes the launch had disappeared, and paddling silently Smith headed in obliquely toward shore. His plan was to let the shore-line guide him to the outer point, and from there head for the ship, letting the run of waves outside determine his general direction, and hoping by this means to strike somewhere near enough to hear some sound from her, like the striking of the bell, or the calling of an order. Watching for a glimpse of the steep sandy beach, or the faint outline of a tree or shrub, Smith failed to give enough attention to the growing uneasiness of Arab. A growl warned him, and he looked aside to where the dog's muzzle pointed.

Out of the fog came a native canoe, a large one, with four paddlers and two riflemen. They saw Smith even before he saw them, and a challenge rang out, for the fog had turned both natives and white man into gray shapes without identity. Smith was afraid to answer for fear his voice would betray him, and as if he did not hear, he kept on obliquely past the other canoe, but the challenge was repeated, and the larger boat moved forward to block his course. Seeing that discovery was unavoidable, Smith opened fire, sending the six shots from his automatic into the center of the crowded boat, and then paddled ahead feverishly.

The natives had not been sure that the small boat contained an enemy, and were anxious to save their scanty store of ammunition, besides not wanting to betray their position in the ring of boats that encircled the launch. The heavy revolver fired at close range killed the rifleman in the bow, who fell forward across the gunwale, giving the boat an ugly list, wounded two of the paddlers, and so confused and handicapped the second rifleman that Smith's boat was disappearing into the fog before he could free himself from the body of the paddler who had fallen backward across his legs, put his weight on the light side of the boat to keep it from capsizing, and fire.

SMITH was bending low, paddling with all his strength. A bullet came through the thin side of the boat just above the water's edge, and another seared his back like the stinging cut of a vicious whip. The native, for a rarity, was a good shot, and only the fog saved Smith. As he whirled the boat's head into a new course to offset the rifleman's aim, he realized that the man could no longer see him or the boat, and hurried away from the angry smack of the bullets in the water around the spot where he had disappeared.

The native boat with its dead and wounded and a hole in the bottom the size of a man's thumb, where one of Smith's bullets had been deflected and tore end over end instead of boring through, could not give chase, and following the shore-line Smith made the mouth of the bay and headed for the ship.

Fortunately for his cockle-shell, the sea was smooth, there only being enough motion in the gentle swells to give him direction. There was no wind. The fog still lay a damp enveloping pall over everything. From his watch Smith knew that he had been away from the launch less than fifteen minutes, and since there had come no sound of shots or of a struggle behind him, he knew that the *Jumping Jack* with its crew and cargo was yet safe.

Roughly, from the point of land to the ship's position was about two miles, and paddling steadily Smith took up his muscle-and-nerve-trying task. Not only must he paddle with all his strength, but to keep his direction he must watch constantly the roll of the sea and pay no attention to the disconcerting influence of the fog. He hoped to make it in half an hour. He must make it, he told himself, or it would have been better if he had stayed to help in the defense of the launch.

At the end of fifteen minutes he stopped to listen. Weirdly and faintly as if it might be imagination, he caught the striking of five bells.

"We're going back to the ship," he said to the dog. "Do you get me, Arab, old man?"

In answer the dog whined understandingly, and thrust up his nose to take Smith's caressing strokes.

"Where's the ship, Arab?" said Smith, an idea coming to him, and the dog ran to the bow and leaned over, letting out a little yelp of eagerness. "Good boy!" said Smith, and repeated, "Back to the ship, Arab, back to the ship!" as he took up the paddle to commence his work again.

The crease across his back was beginning to burn and stiffen, and from behind him shoreward had come an intense outburst of firing, but whether from the vicinity of the launch or from some other point ashore, he was unable to determine. Then came a danger which he had not counted on. The next native boat in line from the one he had run foul of, had rushed in at the sound of firing, found the disabled boat, and followed from where he had disappeared in the fog.

Not the zigzag course around the shoreline, but straight out to the mouth of the bay to head him off in his dash for the ship. By chance he had eluded them there, but knowing the direction of the ship, and thinking that the sailor would now take a straight course, they came swiftly after, being guided finally by the sound of Smith's inexpert paddling.

Arab's stiffening bristles and his interest at the stern of the boat, warned Smith of the presence of enemies. Soon he, as well as Arab, caught the sound of the pursuing boat, so close that it was only a question of minutes until it would be near enough for the natives to see him. Smith's only chance to dodge was while still hidden in the fog, and dipping his paddle with as little noise as possible, he turned abruptly to one side, and after a dozen strokes quit paddling to listen.

The native boat went by so close that he could hear the suck of the paddles and the slap of the bow against the water, and then, no longer hearing him as a guide ahead of them, Smith heard a half-toned order, and the native boat stopped also, so that the keen ears of its occupants could pick up the trail again.

Smith was afraid to paddle, afraid almost to move, and Arab stood motionless beside him, restrained from all sound by his master's stroking hand. His presence gave Smith a plan of action. With the point of his jack-knife he scrawled on the dog's brass collar, "Help! Launch upper bay," and that done, he bent over and, putting command and faith and entreaty into his tone, whispered softly into Arab's ear—

"Go to the ship."

The dog seemed bewildered for a moment, and so Smith lifted him carefully and placed him over the side into the water. Then he pointed and again whispered his order, commandingly, almost harshly, and the dog with one glance backward to make sure, commenced swimming ahead.

"Go to the ship," repeated Smith with his lips, and Arab looked back one more time to catch his master's hand waving him on.

Then noisily Smith took up the paddle and commenced to row in the other direction. Immediately from the fog came the answering swish of water, as the native boat came after him.

Smith knew that free from interference the dog would make the ship, and he paddled shoreward long enough to make sure that Arab was not discovered before he dodged again. This time the natives were close enough to see him. He turned the little boat swiftly, and by a desperate effort regained the shelter of the fog. The natives were too close to the ship to risk the alarm of gun-fire, and preferred a more silent method of disposing of the messenger.

Smith felt this, and with the growing distress from his wound, knew that he could not hope to dodge the larger boat much longer, so while still hidden, he abandoned the boat, preferring to take his chance by swimming and floating with the tide toward the ship, than to fall into the hands of the natives.

To help keep afloat, he took both the boat's paddles. He was just in time, for safe in the fog bank, he heard the two boats scrape together, and the contention of excited voices. The firing on shore had broken out afresh. Smith floated on his back, afraid to make strokes for fear the splashing would betray his position, and planned to dive under the surface, if he heard the boat coming nearer. The argument continued.

Part of the natives wanted to continue the search for the swimmer, while the others, stimulated by the shots ashore and disgusted with the fruitlessness of their chase, wanted to get back into the attack on the launch.

This faction won out, and Smith heard the sound of a hatchet, as the bottom of the small boat was smashed in, and then the sound of paddling growing fainter as the boat went shoreward. Cautiously he swam back toward the wrecked boat, and after a search which left him exhausted, threw his tired body across its sunken edge, for though destroyed for the use of a paddle, there was enough buoyancy left in the wood to keep him afloat.

DICK REASONER was seeing to the adjusting of a side-cleaner's stage when a moving spot out on the fog-wreathed water attracted him. He rubbed his eyes, and beckoned to "Slim" Higgins.

"What's a seal doing six thousand miles away from home?" he demanded.

"Where?" asked Slim, trying to follow Reasoner's pointing finger, and then "Dictionary Dick" made a wild dash toward the gangway.

"It's Arab," he flung back over his shoulder," and swimming with just his nose out like he was about done for."

A moment later he was helping the dog aboard, where safe on the lower platform Arab stood up and shook himself before he followed Dictionary Dick up the ladder.

"What's up, old boy?" asked Reasoner, stroking his wet head. "Something wrong with the launch?"

Arab turned back toward the gangway and spoke the only language of entreaty he knew—a low whine.

"If Smith sent a message, Arab must have lost it," said Higgins. "Nothing is tied to his collar."

"Maybe there's something under it," answered Reasoner, and unbuckling the wet leather, he took it off for a closer look. The fresh scratches on the brass name plate attracted him.

Help! Launch upper bay.

Meanwhile, the first lieutenant had become uneasy at the launch's late return. To be half an hour late from slow running to and from shore in the fog was reasonable, but when the launch was an hour overdue, he wirelessed an inquiry ashore. To make sure there was no mistake, each person in authority, including the commanding officers of the blue-jackets and marines and their supply departments, was notified before a reply was made, and when it did come, bearing undeniable proof that the launch had gone astray, the first lieutenant consulted the captain, and then ordered the reserve landing party called away.

The bugles commenced their shrill calls to "Cast loose and provide," "Lower all boats," and "Away, landing party," just as Dictionary Dick made his discovery of the message on Arab's collar.

"Good," cried the first lieutenant, as Reasoner handed him the collar. "This tells us where to go at once, without any blindman's buff in the fog. The dog ought to have a medal. Grab a squad out of the first and second divisions. We'll take the second steamer and let the slower boats follow as they get away. Get me the compass course for the upper bay," he told the officer of the deck, "and see that every boat has it before they shove off."

TO THE men on the launch the second attack had come and failed, but had left them with only the revolver ammunition which their guns held. The unlucky Jimmy Wood had received another wound, but propped among the ammunition cases he refused to give up. The second attack had been better planned than the first, and the natives had kept further away so that they had suffered less, while the launch crew used more ammunition, and made fewer hits.

"Here comes one of them with a white rag on a paddle," announced Walters. "What do you say I take a shot at him? I don't trust these fellows, white flag or not."

"Let him come on," advised Morton, and the native boat came close enough for conversation.

From a quick flow of words from this native, Morton interpreted the command, "Vamose, no kill," or words to that effect.

"I don't get you, said Morton in the native tongue.

With gestures the native repeated his offer.

"He wants us to beat it, and leave the ammunition," interpreted the engineer. "He says they'll let us go away safely."

"Nothing doing," said Jimmy Wood. "I don't trust him, and what are we going to get away in, anyhow? You know what they did to the marine sentry they caught."

"I don't know, fellows," hesitated Morton. "It looks as if it might be our only chance, if they'd furnish us boats. They're bound to get us——"

He was interrupted by an outburst of firing, and bullets began to screech and sing through the canopy as the men dodged down. With their attention directed to the man with the flag of truce, it was too good an opportunity for a surprise attack for the natives to miss.

"I got that one, anyhow," said Jimmy Wood, as the man with the rag on his paddle stooped to pick up a gun from the bottom of the boat and lurched overboard.

From all about them the attack developed with new fury, and the sailors carefully hoarding each cartridge, fired only when an actual hit seemed probable. With the slacking of resistance, the attacking boats grew bolder and came in closer, riddling the upper part of the launch with bullets while the sailors crouched on the bottom with almost empty revolvers, waiting for the rifle-fire to cease and the end to come. Morton had rifled the boat box for the ax, while the engineer put his trust in a heavy wrench, and the fireman in a short slice bar.

"Here they come," cried Jimmy Wood, taking a firmer grip on the heavy spare tiller which he had taken from its rack under the seat, and firing the last of his cartridges at the leading boat.

Echoing his words came the shrill call of a steam launch's whistle, and the desperation in Wood's tone faded out instantly.

"Shout!" he cried. "All together! It's help from the ship!"

"Boat ahoy!" the men called and were answered by another blast from the whistle.

The natives fired a last scattering volley, and at a command from the leader, paddled shoreward to where the fog bank let down its sheltering wall. Again the launch signaled, and guided by shouts from the boat's crew, soon came in sight.

"We're on a reef," cried Morton. "Don't get too close!"

A few minutes later the boats under oars began to arrive, and while some of them guarded against another attack, the launch was lightened of its load of ammunition, and pulled off the reef by a line from the other steamer. Then the belated cargo of ammunition was sent around the point to its destination, the guard boats were called in, and the rescuing expedition started back to its ship.

Dick Reasoner was worried about his friend Singleton Smith. He had confidently expected to find him in the rescued launch, and Jimmy Wood's story of what had happened did not reassure him.

"We heard shooting soon after he put off," said Wood. "That's when they done for him, but it's a blessing he was game enough to send the dog on to deliver the message. A few minutes more and that bunch of spiggoties would have had enough ammunition to last 'em a year. Besides," he smiled grimly, "the *Glouster* would have been shy five men instead of one."

"We'll fan out as we go back," instructed the first lieutenant. "I'm hoping yet we will find Smith alive, and if we do, he's to be coxswain of the launch. I'm disgusted with Morton."

Reasoner was afraid to hope. The chances against Smith looked too big, but he remembered now the queer actions of Arab as the second steamer came ashore. The dog had been all eagerness, and yelped with joy from his place on the bow as they started, but when a few hundred yards away from the ship, had suddenly leaped overboard. On an errand of life and death the boat had no time to stop for him.

"He'll make it back to the ship," said Slim Higgins. "He's all worried because he can't find Hobo."

The boats reached the ship with the problem unsolved, and there found Singleton Smith safe in a cot in the sick bay with Arab stretched out on the deck beside him sound asleep. To the dog's keen instinct Smith owed his life, for lying across the sunken boat, paddling with his hands in the direction of the ship—he had lost the paddles—he was so near unconsciousness from exhaustion that when the launch passed near him on its way ashore, he could be heard by the men.

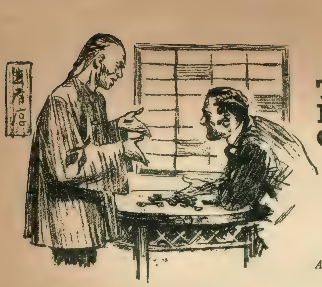
But the supersensitive ears of the dog had caught his master's voice, and the coming of Arab gave Smith fresh courage. As they drifted and paddled nearer the ship, Arab barked loudly for help, and finally guided the dingey to them. When rescued Arab stood up to his neck in the hollowed-out boat, and Smith was barely breathing.

Dictionary Dick tiptoed to the sick bay door with a blanket over his arm. It was unneeded, for the hospital apprentice had already wrapped the wet Airedale in one of his own, and Reasoner went away with his finger on a word in his little dictionary. Slim Higgins caught him scratching his head.

"Reward," he said, grinning. "What's the matter with that?"

"Fine," said Reasoner, "but where does Arab come in? How are we going to reward him?"

"That's carrying the thing too far," said Slim Higgins. "Try him with a piece of fresh meat. 'Doggone the dictionary, if it ain't practicable,' Arab would say himself, if he could talk."



THE TWELVE PADLOCKS

by Carroll K. Michener

Author of "The Woman of The Desert."

THE CARLETON had a habit of being crowded at the dinner hour, so at tiffin I bribed the blue-gowned No. 1 boy to reserve me a table. I am fussy, I confess. I do not like to wait for a table and I do not care to dine *vis-à-vis* with a stranger who perhaps takes his soup in an unpleasant manner. This is the result, doubtless, of being pampered too long by the obsequious Orient.

But I found my table was not reserved for me, after all. The stranger who was established there had without question outbid me in the matter of *cumshaw*, which is the Chinese name for the species of brigandage we denominate the "tip."

"Boy," I inquired, in exasperation, "why-for you no have reserve table?"

"Yes, Mahstah, no have reserve," he responded, smilingly, with characteristic Chinese indirectness.

"Why-for—why-for?" I persisted, though I knew well enough how futile it was to expect a direct answer.

"Not on account of any reason Mahstah," the boy assured me seriously, leaving me to adjust myself, if possible, to the situation and to the stranger.

"Queer fish, these Chinks," volunteered the man at my table. He was irreproachably, though unpleasantly because of my irritation, partaking of his soup. His accent advertised him for an American—in fact I should have known him for a fellow-countryman by no more than the cut of his clothes and the angle of his chin. He had the weathered look of an ex-soldier combined with the appearance of having been long ennuied by the exotic life of the East.

There was a subtle quality about his eyes that seemed to reflect evidence of much travel in many and diverse lands. That unmistakable quality lurks somewhere about all much-traveled persons. There was a trace of dissipation in his face—or perhaps it was only the souvenir of Oriental fevers. He looked withal well seasoned to the East.

I made no answer to his introductory remark. I was feeling much too uncivil. But apparently he took no notice. There are people—born salesmen they must be—who cannot be rebuffed. He talked on until I was compelled either to reply or beat a retreat, and in the end he won me over.

"Of course," he was saying, "it was all a matter of *cumshaw*. I offered him more than you did. He could not foresee anything like that when he promised to reserve the table for you. Therefore, he would argue—if he could argue—that he could not be expected to hold to an agreement that turned out to his disadvantage. Not Anglo-Saxon logic, is it? But what interests me more is the Chinese habit of indirection. They won't approach any subject in a straight line.

"You heard the answers the boy gave you? Neither one responsive. Ah, they're difficult to understand—and crafty. But there's another characteristic—their superstition—that knocks their craftiness clean out. We foreigners never will fathom the Chinese well enough to beat them at all points of the game, but we can always get them on this weak spot—their superstition.

I happen to have a case in mind that fits the theory——"

He paused to glance at me, apprehensively.

"You're not bored?" he asked. "So many people out here are bored, you know. One never knows. You'd rather not hear me chattering?"

I could see that his inquiry was made not so much with an eye to my real convenience as to insure my attention. I gave him a shake of the head, and he went on at once:

"I'm from inland, you know—and I must talk. We chaps from up-river have to talk to a white man occasionally or we'd go insane. Think of it, man, months in a reeking interior city, without railroads, without electric lights, without any visible reminder that you're in the twentieth century and not in the sixteenth. No white face for months at a time.

"When we get a furlough—and the company's none too generous on that score—it usually comes just in time to save our sanity. We take the first boat down-river for the coast. Now here I am, just in an hour ago on a steamer that carried four hundred and seventy-five Chinese farmers, their loquacious wives, their bleating goats, their quacking ducks and their enormous bundles.

"There was only one other white man on board, and we talked each other completely out. We probably would have done some mutual knifing over our own beer in another night on board. And now that I'm here I've got to talk to some one—to a white man. That's what I've come eight hundred miles for, after a penal servitude, or solitude, of eight months.

"But I started to tell you about these crafty Chinese. Their only weak point is their superstition, I maintain, and that's how a clever white man can get the best of them. This case I have in mind is a queer one. A fiction writer might make it into a story. He could call it 'The Twelve Padlocks.' It's about a friend of mine—we'll call him Andrews—and a bunch of very clever, but very old-fashioned Chinese merchants. I believe there was even a magistrate among them. It can't do Andrews any harm to tell you this, even though he's an American and you are in the consular service.

"Oh, I don't need to be told that—I would have guessed it even if the No. 1 boy here hadn't told me. But the case probably hasn't been brought to your attention. It probably won't be. The crafty old Chinks that lost their four hundred thousand dollars to this Andrews chap aren't going to lose a million dollars' worth of 'face' by taking their troubles to the American consular service.

"I suppose you've been out here long enough to discover how suspicious and distrustful the Chinese are. No one really trusts anybody. The son mistrusts his father, and father suspects son. Business partners don't trust one another. Of course this characteristic is being modified considerably in the treaty ports where the Chinese come in business contact with foreigners; that's evident from the growth of the native banking business. But there are still big communities in China that won't keep their money in a bank.

"This was the case with the merchants in a walled city where Andrews was stationed by his company—British-American tobacco, you may have guessed. There was a big Chinese *hong* there—pottery firm—that must have had an annual income of half a million. Do you suppose the directors would do business with a bank? They would not! The twelve fat, whiskered, silk-coated old rascals kept the company funds in a huge iron box locked with twelve old-fashioned padlocks. Each had his own padlock, and business couldn't be transacted unless all twelve were present to perform the rite of opening the safe."

I had mellowed a bit toward the stranger, or rather, I had become resigned to him. At this point I even asked some more or less intellingent question by way of expressing interest.

"I suppose," he explained, "it's a good deal like this: these twelve old boys were all honest enough—with one another. They must have been or they wouldn't have hung together for so long. But the collection of padlocks was designed not so much for protection against one another as for protection to themselves from all suspicion of dishonesty.

"In a country where every one suspects some one, it is necessary to take even such a ridiculous precaution as that to avoid the finger of suspicion. If the safe was robbed, they figured, no one of them could be blamed, since it would have required all twelve to get it open.

"ANDREWS shared warehouse space with the pottery *hong*. In fact his offices were practically identical with those of the Chinese outfit. The big iron box with the twelve padlocks stood in a room where it was always visible to Andrews. It was so large—so he told me—that the room must have been built around it. The door was not large enough to have let it through.

"No great attention was given to guarding this treasury. There were watchmen on duty at the warehouse, but I fancy the twelve directors put their faith largely in the great strength of the box, and in the imposing cluster of padlocks.

"I'd better tell you something about this Andrews, I guess. Can't do him any harm, because Andrews is not his real name and there's probably lots of salt water by this time between China and the place where he's enjoying that cool four hundred thousand. Andrews was a reformed yeggman. You'll agree with me such a thing is possible? Not the ordinary sort—don't think of him as the lingo-talking jailbird kind you read of in the fiction.

"He had an education. And what he didn't get in school he got from a woman—a decent woman. What put him into the yegg business there's no good asking. Probably he's not telling. Why should he? He 'worked' mostly along the California coast. The San Francisco police would remember him yet for several little jobs they've never been able to clean up. But Andrews squared for them in a way by getting into a uniform in the Spanish-American war. He served in the Philippine insurrection, and later in the Constabulary.

"Then he drifted about the China coast for a while in various more or less respectable occupations—all of them, at any rate, just short of his old vocation of lock picking. There were times when he might have gone back to it, but he managed to stick his reform resolution out.

"Well, you can see what a trial that old iron box in the pottery *hong* was for Andrews. It offered so easy a job it was ridiculous. In twenty minutes he could have filed a master key that would unlock all twelve padlocks. He hadn't cracked a safe in a mighty long time, and his ethics were pretty good, but that strong box was a cruel temptation. He wavered many a time, and twice he filed keys that would have done the job.

"Once he went so far as to open the box, while the Chinese watchman dozed outside in the compound. He fingered the packets of Chinese bank-notes. Curiously, these old merchants pinned their faith to banking currency though they avoided the banks as depositaries. Two things at first helped Andrews over the temptation: genuine honesty, and a bit of wholesome fear. On the one hand the habits of his recent years of semi-decency held him back, and on the other hand his knowledge of how difficult it would be for him to get away with his booty.

"There were several hundred miles of slow river travel between him and the coast. His sudden departure would put him under suspicion, and concealment of the money would be next to impossible. Nothing can be concealed among the Chinese. There are no secrets. If he should carry off the contents of the box the robbery would be discovered a few hours afterward, when the directors gathered for the daily ceremony of removing the twelve padlocks. Then the hue and cry would be down upon him.

"Andrews used to tell me how comical it was to watch the twelve directors assemble for the unlocking ritual. It was better than anything he'd ever seen in comic opera. But its very openness—its childish simplicity—seemed to be the greatest security of the strong-box system. A Chinese yeggman might have been equal to the situation, but Andrews wasn't.

"But by and by there came a sudden event that made it very easy for Andrews to fall. One of the twelve directors died. Custom decreed that a new director could not be elected until after the funeral of the deceased. It was the superstition that if the deceased's key should be used before the formal election of a successor the spirit of the dead man would be jealous and cause the user's death. Do you see how it was? The strong-box, on that account, had to remain closed, and business be hanged, until after the funeral.

"No man could possibly be found—least of all among the directors—who would have braved the superstition of meeting death if he grated the dead man's key in its padlock. The best the directors could do would be to consult the Taoist priests and bribe them into picking an early 'auspicious date' for the funeral. You know how those things are arranged. The priests, if they were greedy enough, might hold them up for many days before they completely exhausted the directors' patience.

"Andrews knew all this, and he wasted no time in listening to his conscience. The funeral, he figured, couldn't take place decently inside of two weeks. Robbery of the strong-box, therefore, couldn't be discovered until after the thief was too far away to give chase.

"Well, to be brief about how the affair turned out, the doubled guard posted that night at the warehouse saluted him respectfully and without suspicion as he left late in the evening after burning much kerosene over ostensible office work. Carelessly protruding from under his desk was a suitcase into which he had transferred all the portable valuables in the iron strong-box. He left thet welve ridiculous padlocks dangling from the bolt of the big safe, just as if they never had been touched.

"Two days later, while the eleven surviving directors were still engaged in frantic negotiations with the Taoist priests for the setting of a date for the funeral, Andrews pulled the suitcase from under his desk and boarded a river steamer for Shanghai.

"Of course I've never heard the end of the story. We can only imagine that.

"Picture the old silk-capped pottery merchants escorting to the strong-box with its silly padlocks their newly-elected associate, entrusted legally with the deceased's key. Imagine them opening it up and finding nothing inside but a few bars of silver too heavy for Andrews to pack away. Delicate, isn't it?"

The stranger chuckled at this thought. He seemed tremendously pleased—more so than he ought, I reflected—over this moral lapse of his friend. For my part I could see nothing extraordinarily clever in Andrews' coup. It was very simple, I thought, and said so.

The stranger was silent for a moment, regarding me anxiously. He wore the expression of a child that has been cutting capers for admiring applause only to receive the reproving and unflattering glances of his elders. Before he could reply a Hawaiian orchestra struck up one of the plaintive tropic-island melodies, and my companion directed his attention eagerly to the performance. A look of unmistakable nostalgia came into his face as he listened.

"That music has a great effect on me," he remarked when the orchestra had finished. "It always makes me homesick. I've seen a good deal of the islands, coming and going. They've come to mean something peculiarly like home to me, though I've never lived there. I suppose it's the sort of homey melody of the Hawaiian songs that does it. They make you think of old times and old places. How does the poetry go, about that 'Old unhappy far-off things, and memories long ago?' That isn't correct, I know, but that's the general idea. Have you ever felt that way?"

He enlarged on this point almost to the degree of irrelevance, and then suddenly reverted to the padlocks.

"What do you think—tell me frankly," he asked, "of Andrews' little stunt? Do you blame the poor fool very much? Remember all I've told you about him. There he was, marooned among a lot of yellow aliens, thousands of miles from home—if he had any place he could call home—and that's it, you see—he was only a poor bit of driftwood likely to end his days with a touch of cholera or by means of strong drink, in some odd corner of this dirty old country.

"Do you blame him very much for falling down on his good resolutions, for violating the best traditions of the Service, and taking a chance that would put him forever beyond his miserable existence here? He could go home, you see—probably has. He could settle down to an honest life for the rest of his days."

"He could afford that," I remarked, with unnecessary dryness, I suppose.

"I guess you're right. The poor fool would never even be able to justify himself to himself. He has been in the Service, he's been a soldier. You understand what that means. And he's had these few years of honesty since then. All that would make it hurt more. His conscience would be a hell for him—it would be damnation. And I suppose even now he has begun to find his money a burden.

"He'll be careless with it. He'll gamble, probably, and drink. That's the worst of it. He couldn't enjoy it soberly. He'd have to drink it up. Maybe something worse—'hop,' for instance. It's sure to ruin him in the end. He'll never get any good out of it. The poor fool—the poor imbecile."

THE orchestra was playing again, a medley of familiar home songs. The stranger forgot his food in the intensity of his listening. Then at the end of the medley came a strain of "Dixie," and "The Star-Spangled Banner." There was only a bar of the latter, but with a clatter the stranger got to his feet, standing straight and grave until the notes of the national anthem ceased. I stared at him, scarcely comprehending at first. We civilians, before the great war, were insufferable clods in the matter of inattention to simple courtesies to the flag and the national air.

Others were on their feet in the motley assemblage that filled the café. It was a good deal of an American rendezvous. Among them was an officer of the Navy, and with him a figure in khaki. The stranger's eyes rested on these men with a proud glow. He made a half-movement to approach them, then subsided into his chair.

We said no more of Andrews, but talked of things nearer to the hour and to his starved interest. We left the café together, almost as if we were old acquaintances. My irascibility seemed to have vanished under his dogged friendliness. I would have taken him to the club, or to my rooms for a cigar and a liqueur, but he seemed to be in haste. Perhaps I only fancied it, but his hurry seemed to be stimulated by an incident at the door.

A well-dressed Chinese entered as we came out, jostling clumsily against us. He looked keenly at my companion—in fact he stared. Apparently the Chinese fancied an acquaintance which was not recognized by the stranger, for he turned away and stepping hastily into a rickshaw was whirled away into the confusion of the street. The Chinese called out to a man waiting in the shadow of the doorway, and after a moment of voluble instructions, entered the café, leaving the other to dash into the street in the direction taken by the stranger's rickshaw.

I suppose I spent the remainder of the evening at the club. At any rate it was late when I reached my rooms in the consular building. I stumbled over a suitcase that stood just inside the door. Evidently it had been left there by mistake, for it was not mine. It was closed but not locked, and the catches seemed to invite examination. Curiosity overwhelmed me. I laid the suitcase open on a table, and for a full minute stood whistling before its contents. It was filled to the brim with trim packets of Chinese bank-notes.

There was no name on the case, and I could find no clue to the mystery of its presence in my room. Was it unlikely that this was the four-hundred-thousand-dollar loot of the man Andrews? Still further, was it unlikely that my dinner companion at the café was himself this Andrews?

I called my No. 1 boy. He shuffled his way into the room, blinkingly, and professed entire ignorance of the suitcase. He roused all the servants, but they were ignorant likewise. I gave them up in exasperation. Doubtless some of them knew all about it, but true to "character" professed ignorance lest in some way they should be involved in unpleasantness. It was a sort of first cousin, I thought, to the kind of suspicion that inspired the padlocks.

I pored over the contents of the suitcase. Four hundred thousand dollars, there was no doubt after a rough count, lay before me. As I fingered the packets I began a busy mental process of working out an explanation. It seemed a reasonable theory: that Andrews and the stranger in the café were one and the same. But could the presence of the suitcase here mean a sort of repentance, a strange method of reparation? What was I to infer?

Should I imply that to me had been intrusted the task of restoring the loot—a task that probably might be both dangerous and impossible to him? Or had he, on the other hand, simply put the money in my temporary keeping, intending to call for it later? Perhaps he was the subject of a pursuit—perhaps, in danger of capture or detection, he adopted this fantastic means of hiding his booty. In effect, then, he made me an accomplice. Should I accept such a rôle, or should I return the money at once to its owners? An inquiry through the consular service doubtless would discover for me who these owners were.

On the whole I was inclined to the belief that Andrews, repentant, had given me this wordless, implied invitation to act as the purifier of his conscience.

It was too late to trouble the consul. It was too late even to carry the money to a place of greater security. I determined to sleep with one eye open and conceal the suitcase beneath the bed.

I slept well over so much treasure, but with both eyes shut, it seems. In the morning I found that even the cord with which I had innocently tied the suitcase to one of my hands had been snipped without in the least distracting my slumber. As for the suitcase, it was gone.

Of course I raged at the servants in a thorough "foreign-devil" fashion. My words were such as to express suspicion. The servants grew very sad and patiently indignant. I even went so far as to threaten dismissal of them all, a thing that did not seem remotely probable either to me or to them. To dismiss them undoubtedly would be to get a worse set of servants; to keep them might eventually be the means of solving the riddle.

It did not appear to me, on reflection, that there was anything in particular to be done about the matter. I could only wait further developments from some source or other, probably from Andrews. If he had meant to make me only a temporary receiver for his loot he would be back again for it. If he had intended its restoration I probably would see no more of him. In that case I was at something approaching conscience-clear. But if he should return demanding an accounting of my stewardship, what sort of conviction would my explanation carry? Would he have his revenge upon me?

It was not entirely in an easy frame of mind that I dined that evening at my accustomed table. The stranger was not present. Nor did he appear while I was there, though I loitered in the uneasy hope of seeing him.

I had begun a stealthy investigation into the truth of Andrews' story. Through means at my hand in the consular service it seemed likely I should eventually learn the remainder of the story of the twelve padlocks. As an afterthought, when I returned home that evening, I administered a bribe to the No. 1 boy. It was not a large bribe, and I should not have expected a large return for it. In fact it brought only another mystery—a pale one, scarcely recognizable at first as anything but accident.

While I dressed next morning I found on my table a large iron key. It was of an old-fashioned character, and bore the curious trademark of some English maker. I asked the room boy about it, but he was able to express only a mild interest. He either could not or would not venture an opinion as to its origin or as to the reason for its being there.

Doubtless I should have thought no more about the key if another had not been beside it when I arose on the following morning. On the next morning there was a third, and on each succeeding day an addition, until I had half a pound or so of the clumsy bits of steel and brass cluttering my table. Once I bundled them up and hurled them into the courtyard, exasperated at the mystery they represented. The next morning I was rewarded by finding them all back again, with the usual addition.

Suddenly the collection ceased to grow. And of a sudden, cursing myself for my stupidity, a solution to the mystery of the keys flashed upon me. I counted them, and as I suspected, there were twelve. Here, then were the keys to the twelve padlocks!

But this far and no further would the solution go. I had a daily desire to commit medieval cruelties on my smiling No. 1 boy, who I felt certain knew the answer to the puzzle. I was torn between this irritation and an impulse to meet his undoubted terms—a handsome *cumshaw*. Also I began to fear this crafty servant somewhat. There was somewhere in all this business of the keys and padlocks a lurking menace—perhaps tragedy.

My inquiry through the consular service yielded me nothing. I could not find even the habitat of the twelve gray merchants of the iron strong-box. Neither did I encounter Andrews, nor could I find trace of him among the numerous haunts of white men in either the foreign or the Chinese quarters. I found those who knew him, but none who had seen him recently.

At the offices of his firm they had no knowledge of his arrival from up river.

Doubtless, I thought, he had sailed away. Fear might have sped him to this disappearance, but I was inclined to stick to my theory of an eleventh-hour repentance. I had conceived a certain respect for him that could not wholly be discounted by his own recital of "Andrews' " moral lapse.

THE hot season was just coming on, and I slipped away for a week or two into the hills at Mokanshan. When I returned I had almost forgotten the mystery of the twelve keys. I was not thinking of it, at least, on the morning I set out on one of my numerous jade-collecting excursions into the native city. For an hour or more I browsed about among the shops of a quarter with which I was familiar.

I was growing a bit tired of the heat, the sweating coolies, the stench of sewage, and the ruck of so much crowded, unlovely humanity, and would have returned to a comfortable lemonade and tiffin if it had not been for the Chinese guide that stepped up and wheedled me into following him to a new jade shop of which I never had heard. I followed him, though I did it reluctantly, for he led me some distance beyond the streets with which I was familiar. He was a guide I did not recall seeing before, and this did not reduce my reluctance.

We were jostled in the narrow thoroughfares by shouting coolies, assailed by the cries and stares of filthy street urchins, and followed by the insistent choruses of disease-scarred beggars. We passed down a long shaded street of violin-makers, and then delved into alleys broken by frequent puzzling traverses designed to obfuscate Chinese devils that can proceed only in straight lines. At last we came to the ocher-colored wall of a Chinese temple, looking more ancient even than its undoubted years because of its leprous splotches of saltpeter.

I was not surprised to have the guide lead me inside the temple grounds, for such inclosures usually are lined with shops, but I was disturbed to find the temple yard deserted. Weeds grew rankly between the flagstones of the court, and the temple buildings were in a state of unusual decay. The sun beat down into this desolate enclosure and the sounds of the teeming city seemed suddenly remote. I had a feeling of apprehension that made me clutch tentatively at the little revolver I carried—quite needlessly, my friends told me—on such excursions.

The guide led me rapidly along the shaded pavilion of vacant shop-fronts to an inner court. Here was a slimy green basin that doubtless once had boasted of being a lotus pool. It seemed to be fed from the tidewater overflow of a canal. The place reeked with heat and miasma. I felt sick and dizzied by the frightful breath of sewage, and the gusts of noon-day sunlight reflected from the gray tiles of the temple roofs.

The guide paused significantly, and I followed his gaze to one end of the green basin where there was visible, half in shade and half in sunlight, the iron bars of a curious enclosure. I moved nearer, inspired by a rising curiosity over something that moved sluggishly behind those bars. Not until I had gazed a full minute upon the horrible creature visible there did the meaning of the thing come to me.

I was stupefied by the filth that surrounded him and made his features hideous; by the uncomprehending look of senility and disease in his vacant eyes; by fragments of meaningless, parrot-like English words that dropped from his imbecile lips. The creature was the relic of Andrews, my companion at the dinner-table. For that he was Andrews I could no longer doubt from the circumstance of the twelve ugly padlocks that fastened the iron grate behind which he rotted.

The guide disappeared, I found, as with a murmur of rage—and I will not deny it: of fear—I rushed back through the outer courtyard, in mad haste to bring the keys that would give liberty to poor Andrews.

He still is in the sanatorium in Japan where his tobacco firm generously sent him, but the doctors do not see great encouragement for him. His eleventh-hour repentance in the matter of the twelve padlocks seems to have come—or at least so the Chinese devils appear to have decreed it—a moment or so too late. And I have an idea that whatever devils were concerned in the business of clouding his mind had a fairly intimate working agreement with the twelve crafty merchants whom Andrews commiserated for their fatal superstitions.

The CAMP-FIRE

A Meeting-Place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers

ONLY those who don't care for it claim fishing is not adventure, yet both in our stories and at our Camp-Fire there's been very little said about it. Now, however, Harold Titus raises a few points in connection with his story in this issue that may start something.

He is not fishing this season, however. In the Army and trying hard to get to France. Today also comes a letter from Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur who, like his collaborator, Farnham Bishop, after many attempts and some special physical training, has finally got into the Army, though not so close to the front as he tried for. Roy P. Churchill, also with a story in this issue, is back in the sea service of his country, today's mail bringing word of his work.

THESE are only four out of many of our writing comrades who are in our country's service. I often wonder how we are able to go on getting stories up to our standard in numbers sufficient to our needs. On the face of things it looks impossible, but our magazine has been growing not only in circulation but in the number of writers who send us stories, enough, it seems, to keep things nearly normal in spite of the fact that our writers are particularly of the type which furnishes men for war. I have no facts for comparison but venture that our writers have furnished an unusually high percentage of men in service.

AND meanwhile here is that fishing story. We have need, in these times of tension, of amusements that temporarily relieve our minds and nervous systems of the strain under which labor all of us not too dull to understand the world-crisis slowly developing day by day. That is why our magazine is buying even fewer stories with the atmosphere of the present war than formerly. So far as we can be of service, the more closely we keep our minds on the war, the better. But when we have time for deliberate relaxation and amusement the more relief we get from the war-strain, the better able we'll be to carry our end of it when we turn back from relaxation to work.

At our Camp-Fire it would be both foolish and wrong to bar discussion of the war, but we make up the magazine well ahead, as you know, and events move too rapidly for current topics to be still current by the time written words have reached you in print. What I'm writing now will reach you in June, but I'm writing it in April while all the world is trembling on the issue of the great Hun offensive now under way. Yet, though it's hard to think of anything else, there is nothing I can say that would have any interest two months from now. No man now knows whether the Germans will be held and bled to death or whether they will be able to pound their way through to a victory that would damn the world for generations and doom it to years more of warfare, on our own soil as well as on many other bloody fields. Probably you will know when you read this. No one knows now. What a vast gulf two months can be!

AND while destiny unfolds we must keep our balance by meeting the strain intelligently, working as long as we can work effectively, resting and relaxing when we need to rest and relax for the sake of the work itself. So it is good to go fishing with Harold Titus, forgetting war a while so that we may come back rested, refreshed and better able to do each his own part in the grim task lying to our hands. As the author of this story is himself doing.

> I suppose my home town, Traverse City, Michigan, is the "fishingest" place they could find with a search warrant. We are located on some of the best trout water east of the Rockies. In fact, the Boardman River, which flows through the town itself, has been one of the remarkable streams of the Great Lakes country, and we are within easy

reach of innumerable rivers that offer splendid sport. A big proportion of the population fishes, too. I believe that some of the best fishermen that ever wore waders call this particular place home. You see, we have men here who have followed the sport through all its phases from the days when grayling were plentiful until now, when those varieties of trout that will survive warm waters are being planted in streams which drain settled country to keep them from being fished out.

THE catch which I describe in this story is one which was made by my friend "Pat" Hastings, who has hooked his share of 'em. It's a dog-gone good fish story (his, I mean) and may seem a bit incredible to a novice who reads it, but I'll vouch for its adherence to fact. Two changes I must mention, however; the first is that I have moved the time of the catch forward three or four hours for the purposes of the plot; the other is that the fish actually taken was not quite as large as the one in my yarn. Six-pounders and larger are taken from this water occasionally, but a fact which I have never had clearly explained is that these big fish, caught after dark, do not fight with anywhere near the vigor they display when hooked in daylight.

It is during the hatch of the caddis fly that the big browns are taken from the Boardman River in the greatest numbers. The best water is within fifteen minutes from town by automobile and each evening during the hatch of this insect you'll see a representative gathering of liars and fly-fishermen strung out along the stream trying to get the big one of the season.

THIS river, by the way, demonstrates what can be done by restocking. To a large extent it flows through relatively newly-settled country. Fifteen or twenty years ago it was alive with speckled trout, but as the timber was cut off, the water warmed, and the number of fishermen increased, these fish fell off. Rainbow were planted and did fairly well but, even then, the sport was mediocre. Then the State commenced sending up German Brown spawn and now the Boardman shows every sign of reviving and some regular old-time catches were made last Summer. We know that the speckled trout, like the grouse, can not stand up under civilization. Many men do not like the Rainbow, although it's a sporty fish. The Brown, however, is a noble fighter, good to eat and seems to withstand the clearing up of streams. Propagating this variety in quantities is going to keep rivers stocked indefinitely, it seems.

ONE attractive feature about this part of Michigan is the diversity of water and country offered. We have pond fishing in many places. There are trout streams, like the Boardman, almost in your dooryard. Again, given a Ford and three hours, you can strike streams like the Manistee or the Au Sable (that last will take an hour or so longer), which run through country as desolate as any white man could ask for. The upper waters of the Manistee are still well stocked with speckled trout, than which no better fish ever rose to a fly, and many other rivers still offer this particular kind. The Rainbow predominates elsewhere and the Brown is fast appearing in waters hitherto strange to it. Another interesting fact is that you can fish, say, one day in the little Platte River where the speckled trout has a bright steel-blue cast, the next in the Rapid where they color a rich orange with lots of red on the fins and again in streams farther to the eastward where they get the pink tint on the belly.

Lots of bass, too, in this country, but most of the natives go nutty over trout and the bulk of the bass fishing is done by men who come especially for it.—HAROLD TITUS.

GOD knows where Lieutenant Dwyer will be by the time your answer to his inquiry of January could reach him, but if you know what he asks, write him in our care and we'll forward to the best of our ability. He was in a U. S. camp when he wrote. Perhaps it would be safer just to print the answer in the magazine.

Wherever I have been among tropical tramps there is one poem always known. It begins thus:

"So, so, you're come to the tropics.
Thought all that you had to do
Was to be in the shade in a coconut glade,
While the dollars rolled in to you.

and ends:

"You don't go down with a short, hard fall;
You just sort of shuffle along
And lighten your load of the moral code,
Till you don't know the right from the wrong.

Could you not reprint it; or tell where the entire thing may be obtained?—RICHARD M. DWYER, First Lieut., —— Infantry.

NOT the least interesting part of Hugh Pendexter's stories about our old Indian frontier days is the little chat from him at Camp-Fire concerning the history and real Indian customs upon which all his tales are based:

Norway, Maine.

The Skidi, a tribe of the Pawnee confederacy, believed in supernatural animals and located their underground dwellings, or Nahurac lodges, in the valley of the Loup River, Nebraska. In this belief of mythic animals holding councils they will remind you of the Cherokee myths. Guide Rock in Kansas was another Nahurac lodge.

WHEN the Siouan tribes entered the Platte valley they found the Pawnee there. Harahey was the name of the province which the Pawnee told Coronado contained much gold, the Wichita country of east-central Kansas. The confederacy had no totems and descent was traced through the mother. Each tribe had several secret societies, each based on the belief in supernatural animals. One writer gives the time of the last Skidi sacrifice of a human being as 1838. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century Petalesharo, a Skidi chief, rescued a Comanche woman, who was bound to a cross preliminary to being sacrificed, and carried her back to her people, some four hundred miles. This chief was one of the signers of the treaty at Grand Pawnee Village on the Platte in Nebraska, October 9, 1833, by the terms of which they ceded all their lands to the United States south of the Platte River. One authority (Powell) states they were least understood of any of the important plains Indians, and this, perhaps, because during the seventeenth and the greater part of the eighteenth centuries they remained outside the Spanish-French sphere of influence. Their prowess as warriors is established by their successful warfare against the many surrounding tribes.—PENDEXTER.

WHEN we read "On Short Allowance" I queried Mr. Pladwell about several points in it in order to be on the safe side, as we often do on our stories. My queries are of no present interest, but Mr. Pladwell's reply to them is worth listening to. The queries can be gathered from the context; they were intended to make sure of points that might disturb the average reader, not as comments from one wise in all the technicalities of nautical lore:

Oakland, California.

In the first place, the story was a growth of a query. I saw some rotting tubs in Oakland estuary. I wondered what might happen if one of them took a long trip. I got some yarns from old salts hereabouts, and gradually I evolved the yarn, pieced out of the other yarns. Then when it was finished I took it to some of the veteran mariners. I have mucked around the water a lot myself, but never on a three-masted schooner. So I needed criticism.

The mariners helped me much, and yet not one of them saw the points that you saw. They are, I think, debatable.

YOU will note on the map the long series of islands of the Aleutian group, stretching across the north Pacific. These islands as a general rule comprise the northernmost boundaries of the average sailing-ship course across the western ocean. Sometimes prevalent winds drive the windjammers very close to the Aleutians, often in sight of them. The Aleutians are bare, bleak islands, populated by sea-fowl, Aleuts, beachcombers, seals, and occasional wanderers. Many a ship's crew has deserted to take a chance on picking up seal illegally around these islands, and while there is not a real settlement on any of the islands except, I think, one lone mission church, a crew getting there in a small boat has easy chances for survival and, possibly, for profit.

AS FOR willingness to try such an alternative. The schooner in the story is cheap. The food is awful. The master is a martinet. The men are scum, with not a first or second class seaman among them. A few days of cheap food and unwelcome work is enough to make such a collection of men, I think, willing to take a chance, especially when a glib-tongued person is stirring up trouble and putting ideas in the men's heads. To make it more logical I might have put in something saying Big Frank had hinted at seal-poaching; but as I said, the mariners who saw the story took this desertion so much as a matter of course that it is safe to assume there is nothing new about leaving a cheap ship for the thrills of the islands' chances.

OFTEN in the dreary reaches of the night one can find helmsmen dozing at the wheel when the weather is calm. Why not? There is something about the sleep of a man on the job that does not let him make many bad slips. I have often dozed myself at the tiller or the wheel, but the instant the boat slewed off her course I set her right automatically. She can not fall off very badly without your knowing it. The motion of the ship tells you. Now, in the story the crew is desperately shorthanded. In such a case it would be peculiar, perhaps, if the helmsman were not taking a catnap, especially with the weather calm. At least, he might not be wide-awake enough to observe a man sneaking up a hatchway from the after-cabin. On a liner, a tramp or a big four-master such a thing as a sleeping helmsman might be serious, but not on that old tub.

EVEN on the old scows sailing around San Francisco Bay the master's lone helper uses the "sir" to the blowsy old bird who happens to run the thing. But there again my story skids off the usual. With so much to contend with, could the average master induce such a crew of landsmen to observe this matter without possibly starting more grief aboard? They are landsmen, not sailor-men. And yet, toward the end of the voyage, I think he would. I believe that a few "sirs" might not hurt the story. And yet I've seen a drill sergeant in the United States Army work three weeks to make a bunch of rookies say "sir." It's the hardest word in the United States language, I think.—E. S. PLADWELL.

ONE of our comrades at the Camp-Fire, one of the writers of our stories, will no longer gather with us at our meetings. William A. Shryer is dead and I know that our sympathy goes out to the wife and little son he has left behind him.

Born in Terre Haute, Indiana, Mr. Shryer has made his home in Detroit. Well known as a writer on business subjects, he was equally successful with fiction and it was in the quest for material for future stories that he met his death. The news came to me from Honolulu, following by a few weeks a cheerful letter from him enclosing a newspaper clipping telling of a bad fall he had had in the crater of the volcano. March tenth he had preceded his family to a temporary home taken on the Glenwood-Volcano Road, met them at Hilo and on the return trip met his death in an automobile accident due to a nut that had worked loose in the steering gear, sending the car over a sixteen-foot embankment.

His wife and their Japanese maid were severely injured, the boy escaping unhurt. Mr. Shryer's neck was broken and he lived only long enough to tell his wife that he was "done for." The body was brought to Honolulu from Hilo on the *Mauna Kea* and was cremated.

Let us stand and salute him, our comrade, for a life bravely lived, then wish him Godspeed on the Long Trail over which we all will follow.

LOUIS ESSON, whose tale, "The Pearl of Torres," you will find in this issue, introduces himself to the Camp-Fire according to our custom:

> Most Australians are wanderers and adventurers. This roving spirit is a racial characteristic; for if their forebears had not possessed it there would never have been any Australia. All my prople are Scottish; but, though I was born in Edinburgh, I was taken to Australia as a child, and my first memories are of the Big Bush, an ideal playground for boys. There is an abiding fascination in the life of the Bush, with its great spaces, its sheep and cattle, and the quaint characters that meet in the township on market day, or for some great sporting event—a wood chop or race meeting.
>
> I DUTIFULLY did an Arts course at the Melbourne University, studying Latin and Philosophy; but this brought me little credit with Billy Smith, the stockman, who refused to take me seriously at cattle droving, or even riding—subjects unfortunately not included in my academic curriculum. I wasn't up to the bushman's standard, so I drifted into journalism; thence the easy descent!
>
> I have written for most Australian papers and magazines and worked for a year in London, beside publishing a volume of verse and having a play produced in Melbourne; but my best performance in this line was editing a little daily newspaper on the edge of beyond. Strange types would drop into the office—we called it "the office"—drovers and shearers setting out for far back stations, miners from the coal fields, selectors and cockatoo farmers, politicians, and what is called the "scrub aristocracy." It was an exciting life, especially when the worthy president of a wayback agricultural society dropped in to interview the staff with a horsewhip. I usually referred him to the manager, a burly man who had been an amateur pugilist in his early days.
>
> LATER on journalism sent me to Asia where I had my fair share of adventure, wandering through many fascinating lands from Ceylon to Japan. I have seen the dawn rise near Darjeeling over the sacred Katchenjunga; I have been turned back from the Khyber Pass, for my own good; I have been in Peshawar after a raid by the Afridis and I have seen the beggars and yogis 'round the temples at Benares, the sacred cows and monkeys, and the burning of a body at the burning Ghat by the Ganges.
>
> Once I traveled from Moulmein to Bangkok through Burma and Siam. My traveling companion, a forest officer who was going northwards, left me in the middle of Siam. With much difficulty I obtained a boat and a Lao crew who promised to take me down the Menam to Paknam-Po. This was a terrible journey. None of the crew could speak a word of English, and river traveling was slow. Stores ran out, and for three days there was no food except what the Laos had—gigantic bananas, rice suitable perhaps for elephants, frogs and larvae of bees—impossible, even curried. At Paknam-Po I discovered a friendly Englishman who put on a dinner that would have done no discredit to Delmonico's.
>
> MANY Australian journalists are scattered along the Asiatic coast from Singapore to Yokohama. Among others I met at Hong-Kong Pratt, who has since drifted to Bangkok, and Donald, now representing a New York newspaper, both acknowledged authorities on Asiatic affairs.
>
> All Australians are deeply concerned in the fate of the Northern Territory that lies close to Asia, and is perhaps the largest unoccupied territory in the world today. This is our land of romance, a land of pearl and gold, of the mirage, of our strange aboriginals, a more interesting race than is usually supposed, and of the great bushmen and adventurers from all the ends of the earth. My half-brother, Frank Brown, at present in Mesopotamia chasing Turks, has been thrice through the Territory, studying the elaborate native customs and making explorations in uncharted country. I have been through it only once, but I can never forget its subtle spell.
>
> YET, after all, there is always romance at home. Before going to New York and London I spent two years in a cottage only forty miles from Melbourne. But the little clearing was cut out of the virgin forest, huge fallen trees and stumps were 'round our door, and down by the creek an old man, the last of the fossickers, was still puddling for gold. This Bush homestead is at present occupied by Vance Palmer, who is not unknown to readers of *Adventure*.—LOUIS ESSON.

BY THIS time—I am writing in May—I had expected to report considerable progress by the American League for citizenship, Inc., but I've been ill during most of 1918 so far and not able to be on my regular job all the time, so work on the League has had to tread water.

But the prospects are promising, and I expect to have things moving before long. It was never intended that they should move rapidly. Slow and sure and safe is the better method. There need be no doubt as to their moving when the time comes. I make no other promises or predictions, but before long I hope to be able to report practical accomplishments.

ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN

ADVENTURE'S FREE SERVICES AND ADDRESSES

These services of *Adventure* are free to *any one*. They involve much time, work and expense on our part, but we offer them gladly and ask in return only that you *read and observe the simple rules*, thus saving needless delay and trouble for you and us. The whole spirit of this magazine is one of friendliness. No formality between editors and readers. Whenever we *can* help you we're ready and willing to try.

Identification Cards

Free to any reader. Just send us (1) your name and address, (2) name and address of party to be notified, (3) a stamped and self-addressed return envelope.

Each card bears this inscription, each printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of *Adventure*, New York, stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one friend, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. Names and addresses treated as confidential. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for business identification. Cards furnished free, *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application.* We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Later we may furnish a metal card or tag. If interested in metal cards, say so on a *post-card—not* in a letter. No obligation entailed. These post-cards, filed, will guide us as to demand and number needed.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give in full the names and addresses of self and friend or friends when applying.*

Back Issues of *Adventure*

Will sell for $2.20 the following back numbers of *Adventure:* 1914—May, August, September, October, November; 1915—November; 1917—complete.—A. L. BOWMAN, Room No. 9, Bush Street Station, Detroit, Michigan.

Manuscripts

Glad to look at any manuscript. We have no "regular staff" of writers. A welcome for new writers. *It is not necessary to write asking to submit your work.*

When submitting a manuscript, if you write a letter concerning it, enclose it *with* the manuscript; do *not* send it under separate cover. Enclose stamped and addressed envelope for return. All manuscripts should be typewritten double-spaced, with wide margins, not rolled, name and address on first page. We assume no risk for manuscripts or illustrations submitted, but use all due care while they are in our hands. Payment on acceptance.

We want only clean stories. Sex, morbid, "problem," psychological and supernatural stories barred. Use almost no fact-articles. Can not furnish or suggest collaborators. Use fiction of almost any length; under 3000 welcomed.

Mail Address and Forwarding Service

This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding address for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied.

General Questions from Readers

In addition to our free service department "Ask Adventure" on the pages following, *Adventure* can sometimes answer other questions within our general field. When it can, it will. Expeditions and employment excepted.

Remember

Magazines are made up ahead of time. An item received today is too late for the current issue; allow for two or three months between sending and publication.

Letter-Friends Back Home

A Free Service Department for American, Canadian, and Other Allied Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Others in Camp or at the Front.

Any one in the United States or Allied service who wishes to brighten the time with letters from "back home" or wherever else this magazine circulates, and with the personal touch and interest of hitherto unknown friends, can secure these letters and these friends by sending us his name and military address to be published once in this department as soon as censorship of soldiers' foreign addresses permits. In the meantime his address can be printed as "care *Adventure*," letters to be forwarded at once by us to the military address he gives us in confidence. Among our readers of both sexes, all classes and from all parts of the world, he is likely to gain a number of friendly, personal correspondents. He is free to answer only such as he is comfortably able to answer under the conditions that surround him, and it is even suggested that the number of correspondents for any one man be determined by the needs of his comrades as well as by his own.

This magazine, of course, assumes no responsibility other than the publishing of these names and addresses as its space will permit. Experience has shown that the service offered is a very real and needed one, and all not themselves in service are asked to do their part in making the daily life of those fighting in our defense brighter and pleasanter through personal friendships across the intervening miles and by whatever personal, human kindnesses such friendships may suggest.

When giving your military address make it as permanent a one as possible.

CORPORAL RICHARD O. HUMMEL, RAY J. LASER, MERRILL G. RUNDLE, JAMES T. ALLISON and SERGEANT A. KLUG—all care of *Adventure.*

SAPPER PATRICK MARTIN GALLAGHER, Reg. No. 1,099,309; 8 C. R. T., No. 4 Co., B. E. F., France.

PRIVATE RAYMOND J. WILLIAMS, care of *Adventure.*

Missing Friends or Relatives

Our free service department "Lost Trails" in the pages following, though frequently used in cases where detective agencies, newspapers, and all other methods have failed, or for finding people long since dead, has located one out of about every five inquired for. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

Expeditions and Employment

While we should like to be of aid in these matters, experience has shown that it is not practicable.

Addresses

Order of the Restless—Organizing to unite for fellowship all who feel the wanderlust. First suggested in this magazine, though having no connection with it aside from our friendly interest. Address WAYNE EBERLY, 1302 N St. N. W., Washington, D. C.

Camp-Fire—Any one belongs who wishes to.

High-School Volunteers of the U. S.—An organization promoting a democratic system of military training in American high schools. Address *Everybody's*, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City.

Rifle Clubs—Address Nat. Rifle Ass'n of America, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Washington, D. C.

(See also under "Standing Information" in "Ask Adventure.")

Ask Adventure

A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for Adventure Magazine by our Staff of Experts.

QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the department in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each month in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable and standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested, inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert will probably give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their departments subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but for their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided stamped and addressed envelope is enclosed.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular department whose field covers it. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your quesitons definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose department it seems to belong.**

1. Islands and Coasts
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, care Authors' League of America, Aeolian Hall, New York. Islands of Indian and Atlantic oceans; the Mediterranean; Cape Horn and Magellan Straits. Also temporarily covering South American coast from Valparaiso south around the Cape and up to the River Plate. Ports, trade, peoples, travel.

2. The Sea Part 1
J. P. TUCKER, Hotel Lansdale, 1410 Minor Ave., Seattle, Wash. Covering ships, seamen and shipping; nautical history, seamanship, navigation, yachting; commercial fisheries of North America; marine bibliography of U. S. and British Empire; seafaring on fishing-vessels of the North Atlantic and Pacific banks, small-boat sailing, and old-time shipping and seafaring.

3. The Sea Part 2
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, care Authors' League of America, Aeolian Hall, New York. Such questions as pertain to the sea, ships and men, local to the U. S. should be sent to Captain Dingle, not Mr. Tucker.

4. Eastern U. S. Part 1
RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Little Falls, N. Y. Covering Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee, Michigan and Hudson valleys; Great Lakes, Adirondacks, Chesapeake Bay; river, lake and road travel, game, fish and woodscraft; furs, fresh-water pearls, herbs, and their markets.

5. Eastern U. S. Part 2
HAPSBURG LIEBE, Johnson City, Tenn. Covering Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and N. and S. Carolina and Georgia except Tennessee River and Atlantic seaboard. Hunting, fishing, camping; logging, lumbering, sawmilling, saws.

6. Eastern U. S. Part 3
DR. G. E. HATHORNE, 44 Central Street, Bangor, Maine. Covering Maine; fishing, hunting, canoeing, guides, outfits, supplies.

7. Western U. S. Part 1
E. E. HARRIMAN, 2303 W. 23d St., Los Angeles, Calif. Covering California, Oregon, Washington, Utah, Nevada, Arizona. Game, fur, fish; camp, cabin; mines, minerals; mountains.

8. Western U. S. Part 2
CAPT.-ADJ. JOSEPH MILLS HANSON, Yankton, S. Dak. Covering the Dakotas, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri. Hunting, fishing, travel. *Especially* early history of Missouri Valley.

9. Western U. S. Part 3 and Mexico Part 1
J. W. ROBERTSON, 912 W. Lynn Street, Austin, Texas. Covering Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and the border states of old Mexico: Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas.

10. Mexico Part 2
J. W. WHITEAKER, Cedar Park, Texas. Covering Central and Southern Mexico below a line drawn from Tampico to Mazatlan. History, geography, customs, government, animals, minerals, products and industries.

11. North American Snow Countries Part 1
ROBERT E. PINKERTON, 5036 Utica St., Denver, Colo. Covering Minnesota, Wisconsin, Manitoba, a strip of Ontario between Minn. and C. P. R'y. Canoes and snowshoes; methods and materials of Summer and Winter subsistence, shelter and travel, for recreation or business.

12. ★ North American Snow Countries Part 2
S. E. SANGSTER ("Canuck"), L. B. 393, Ottawa, Canada. Covering Height of Land and northern parts of Quebec and Ontario (except strip between Minn. and C. P. R'y); southeastern parts of Ungava and Keewatin. Trips for sport, canoe routes, big game, fish, fur; equipment; Summer, Autumn and Winter outfits; Indian life and habits; Hudson's Bay Co. posts; minerals, timber; customs regulations. No questions answered on trapping for profit.

13. ★ North American Snow Countries Part 3
GEORGE L. CATTON, Gravenhurst, Muskoka, Ont., Canada. Covering Southern Ontario and Georgian Bay. Fishing, hunting, trapping, canoeing.

14. North American Snow Countries Part 4
ED. L. CARSON, Arlington, Wash. Covering Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta including Peace River district; to Great Slave Lake. Outfits and equipment, guides, big game; minerals, forest, prairie; travel; customs regulations.

15. North American Snow Countries Part 5
THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 2837 Fulton St., Berkeley, Calif. Covering Alaska. Arctic life and travel; boats, packing,

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Return postage not required from U. S. or Canadian soldiers, sailors, or marines in service outside the U. S., its possessions, or Canada.

back-packing, traction, transport, routes; equipments, clothing, food; physics, hygiene; mountain work.

16. Hawaiian Islands and China
F. J. Halton, 397 Monadnock Bldg., San Francisco, Calif. Covering customs, travel, natural history, resources, agriculture, fishing, hunting.

17. Central America
Edgar Young, 415 Eighth Ave., Huntington, West Va. Covering Canal Zone, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala. Travel, customs, language, game, local conditions, minerals, trading.

18. The Balkans
Arthur D. Howden Smith, *Evening Post*, 20 Vesey St., New York City. Covering Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Turkey (in Europe); travel, sport, customs, language, local conditions, markets, industries.

19. Asia, Southern
Gordon McCreagh, 21 East 14th St., New York City. Covering Red Sea, Persian Gulf, India, Tibet, Burma, Western China, Siam, Andamans, Malay States, Borneo, the Treaty Ports; hunting, trading, traveling.

20. Japan and Korea
Robert Welles Ritchie, Mountain Lakes, N. J. Covering travel, hunting, customs of people, art and curios.

21. Russia and Eastern Siberia
Captain A. M. Lochwitzky (Formerly Lieut.-Col. I. R. A., Ret.), Quartermaster, U. S. Troops, Mercedes, Texas. Covering Petrograd and its province; Finland, Northern Caucasus; Primorsk District, Island of Sakhalin; travel, hunting, fishing; explorations among native tribes; markets, trade, curios.

22. Africa Part 1
Thomas S. Miller, 1604 Chapin Ave., Burlingame, Calif. Covering the Gold, Ivory and Fever Coasts of West Africa, the Niger River from the delta to Jebba, Northern Nigeria. Canoeing, labor, trails, trade, expenses, outfitting, flora; tribal histories, witchcraft, savagery.

23. Africa Part 2
George E. Holt, Castle View, Meriden, Conn. Covering Morocco; travel, tribes, customs, history, etc.

24. ★ Africa Part 3 Portugese East Africa
R. W. Waring, Corunna, Ontario, Canada, Covering trade, produce, climate, opportunities, game, wild life, travel, expenses, outfits, health, etc.

25. Africa Part 4 Transvaal, N. W. and Southern Rhodesia, British East Africa, Uganda, and the Upper Congo.
Charles Beadle, Grand Isle, Louisiana. Covering geography, hunting, equipment, trading, climate, mining, transport, customs, living conditions, witchcraft, opportunities for adventure and sport.

26. ★ New Zealand, Cook Islands and Samoa
Tom L. Mills, *The Feilding Star*, Feilding, New Zealand. Covering New Zealand, Cook Islands and Samoa. Travel, history, customs; opportunities for adventurers, explorers and sportsmen.

27. Australia and Tasmania
Albert Goldie, 1106 Van Nuys Building, Los Angeles, Cal. Covering customs, resources, travel, hunting, sports, politics, history.

STANDING INFORMATION

For general information on U. S. and its possessions, write Sup't of Public Documents, Wash., D. C., for catalog of all Government publications.

For the Philippines and Porto Rico, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dep't, Wash., D. C.

For Alaska, the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For Hawaii, Hawaii Promotion Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Honolulu, H. I. Also, Dep't of the Interior, Wash., D. C.

For Cuba, Bureau of Information, Dep't of Agri., Com., and Labor, Havana, Cuba. Or J. V. Knight, Director, Republic of Cuba News Bureau, Woolworth Building, New York.

For Central and South America, John Barrett, Dir. Gen., Pan-American Union, Wash., D. C.

For R. N. W. M. P., Comptroller Royal Northwest Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can., or Commissioner, R. N. W. M. P., Regina, Sask. Only unmarried British subjects, age 22 to 30, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs., accepted.

For Canal Zone, the Panama Canal, Wash., D. C.

For U. S., its possessions and most foreign countries, the Dep't of Com., Wash., D. C.

★ (*Enclose addressed envelope with 3 cents in stamps NOT attached*)

The following Ask Adventure editors are now serving in our military forces. We hope you will be patient if their answers are at times delayed: Capt.-Adj. Joseph Mills Hanson; Capt. A. M. Lochwitsky.

Employment in India

Question:—"I am interested in India, Burma and Tibet. Can you give me some information on Darjeeling? Can you give me the name of a newspaper there?

"I am 36 years old, strong, and not afraid of work. My line is electricity and machinery—over 15 years' experience. Am total abstainer from liquor and tobacco and can furnish the best of references. My family—my mother, sister and myself—wish above all else to live in a country where we can at least keep one servant without paying out one's whole salary to do so.

"I understand that employment is difficult to secure in the Far East and that caste conditions make it impossible for a man to work his way up from a minor job. I appreciate that Ask Adventure is no employment agency but I thought perhaps you might know the names of some firms operating in those parts.

"I will gladly pay you for any information locating us in India. We greatly prefer Northern India, but if we can't get there now, are going to try Hawaii or Japan on account of the servant problem until we can get to India."——— ———, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Answer, by Gordon McCreagh:—Your letter is one of the very few which I have received, in reply to which I can give some encouragement about employment in India.

As an electrician and machinist I feel safe in assuring you that you certainly could find employment with one of the big engineering firms on a salary commencing with about two hundred and fifty rupees a month—say eighty-five dollars. This sounds frightfully small, but I'm setting a low estimate, and the buying power of the rupee in India is a whole heap more than the dollar here. On two hundred and fifty rupees you could live with your mother and sister reasonably well and keep three or four servants—you would have to keep at least that number because caste laws restrict the duties of each servant to very definite bounds.

I am sure you would have no trouble in getting employment; but you must, of course, be prepared to wait a while till you can locate yourself. With your qualifications, a couple of months at the outside should see you comfortably settled.

Now about Darjeeling. It's a fine place with a splendid climate, considerably milder both ways than New York. Situated 7,500 feet above sea level, it is a sanitarium city for the worn-out business men and their families from the tropical plains. You will find there department stores, theaters, and high rents. But, you will not find there a job. Not right away, at any rate. The reason being that it is such a paradise spot—for India—that every man in the country spends all his spare time trying to land there—and the town isn't so large that jobs are many. By large, I mean commercially large; there are no mills or manufacturing plants.

Your one chance might be in tea. Tea plantations spread in all directions along the mountain slopes, and they employ one or more white men each who must have a knowledge of machinery in addition to a knowledge of tea. You might get in as an assistant manager on some garden. But pay and prospects wouldn't appeal to you for a minute. An assistant gets about a hundred rupees a month and house.

As to a newspaper. I don't know how a paper will help you, and I don't know that I can give you the name of one. There used to be a small local sheet called the *Darjeeling Standard;* but I heard that the war had put it on the fritz. People read one of the big Calcutta dailies, *The Englishman*, or *The Statesman.*

It seems to me that your best course would be to ship for Calcutta, which is the big manufacturing center of the country, and then look around there. With your qualifications you should land a job without any difficulty, particularly since men are scarce right now.

The wise thing to do would be to leave your folks at home, if you can manage it, and have them come over when you have a job and a little bungalow to bring them to. The journey is nothing for two ladies alone to be frightened at. Many hundreds of English ladies do it every year, and for just the same reason; their men folks have gone on ahead to get things started.

If you are not particularly struck on India, let me suggest Burma to you as a field for your future. Rangoon, the capital is only three days' sail from Calcutta, and, while the opportunities for employment are not quite so great as in Calcutta, the scale of pay is a half as much again, and you will find the people very much pleasanter to get along with. The natives are a vastly more decent race and there is considerably less social snobbery among the English residents.

Burma is a tremendous country and a growing one. There are oil and lumber and mining companies all of which could use a practical electrician. It is worth looking at, and the steamer fare from Calcutta is only about fifteen dollars.

Regarding your offer of payment for information—this Ask Adventure service is entirely free; and *Adventure Magazine* is always pleased to have been able to be of assistance to its readers. If you feel that you want to express your appreciation, why, pass the good word along to the next guy.

School-Ships

Question:—"I am interested in seafaring life, and very anxious to learn navigation. I have heard that there are school-ships that teach this, and would like to know the names and locations of these ships, and rules, regulations and conditions for entering them."—F. J. Shymkus, East St. Louis, Ill.

Answer, by Captain Dingle:—The schools for merchant marine officers are scattered up and down the coast, and all are under the supervision of Mr. Henry Howard, Director of Recruiting, Custom House, Boston, Massachusetts.

From him you can obtain full information.

There was a rule at first which demanded actual sea experience in an applicant; but I believe this has been waived, at least in part, and if you write to Mr. Howard, giving particulars of yourself, age, physical condition, degree of education, and so forth, you may be able to enroll without previous service.

Failing this, you might apply to the Navy Department at Washington for the addresses of the various school-ships taking cadets or apprentices. There is one here, the *Newport*, and you can also apply to the commander of her, North River, New York.

In these school-ships young fellows are taken in the raw, and trained completely to be officers in a real ship under sea conditions.

If you fail on all counts write me again. But I think you can get along with this brief information if you try.

The Grand Cañon of Arizona

Question:—"Can you give me any information as to Aztec ruins in the Grand Cañon of Arizona? I have heard that their old sacred relics were hid in there. Is there any authentic source to this rumor? Has the cañon ever been thoroughly explored? If so, were any minerals found, such as copper, gold, silver, vanadium asbestos? What is known about minerals in or near the cañon? What kind of game and fish? What is the altitude of the mountains there? What is the general formation—granite, limestone, basalt or lava? Volcanic or layer deposit?"—Allen Peeler, Dolores, Colo.

Answer, by Mr. Harriman:—There are cliff-dwellings in the Grand Cañon of the Colorado at one point, but we do not know that the cliff-dweller was Aztec. We can only guess at that, with the probabilities pointing to another race entirely. The Aztecs left records that proved authorship. The cliff-dweller did not. Never heard of buried Aztec relics there save in a novel of lurid and highly imaginative type.

In the Spring of 1858 the cañon was partly explored by Lieut. Ives of U. S. A. Eng. Corps. Went up to lower end Black Cañon in steamer *Explorer*, then through Black Cañon in rowboat to Las Vegas, Wash. Left boat again 100 miles below, joined pack-train, went up east bank to the plateau. Had J. S. Newberry with him as geologist.

1871 Lieut. Wheeler was sent out by chief of Eng. Corps. Explored cañon from below. In the Fall started from Fort Mojave, went to the mouth of Diamond Creek. Gilbert, geologist this trip.

Major J. W. Powell made many trips, in 1869, 1870, '71, '72, '82, '89, part up and part down the cañon.

Charles S. Russell of Prescott and E. R. Monett of Goldfield, both practical miners, made a successful trip. Julius F. Stone of Ohio, with Nathaniel Galloway, S. S. Dubendorff and R. A. Cogswell went from Green River Station, Wyoming to Needles in boats, photographing and examining all the way. Emery C. and Ellsworth L. Kolb, brothers, made same trip to Tovar by boat. Dozens of prospectors have prospected sections.

There are a few claims that give meager returns in gold and many fake claims that wouldn't board a burro, but are taken up to get a grip on some location along the rim that may some day be worth having. I never heard of copper or any other than gold and gypsum there.

In the forests that cover plateaus at the south and northeast there are deer, bear, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, wild turkeys, quail and other small game. Trout are found in creeks. I do not know the river fish of the Colorado.

El Tovar, the big hotel of the Santa Fé system, stands 7,000 feet elevation. Most of the country is a series of great plateaus, not ridged and peaked as are our Sierras, though there are some peaks and ridges at various distances. Look across the cañon and you have the impression of a level line, though there are many dips in it.

The country is built up of layer deposits, capped by lava from various volcanic eruptions. There are many cinder cones, mostly red.

One branch cañon has extensive deposits of beautiful marble. At other places, there are great stretches of granite. A layer of blue limestone exists 2,500 feet below the rim. Other rocks are basalt, black gneiss, slates, quartzites, sandstone, and obsidian or volcanic glass. Thin seams or layers of iron ore give color to much of the rock.

LOST TRAILS

Note—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible.* All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right, in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada.

ADVENTURE HAS FOUND ONE MAN OUT OF EVERY FIVE ASKED FOR

HART, ALBION W. Last heard of in Juarez, Mexico, late in 1913. Age then 19, but passed as 24; large, dark, good education, and well adapted to getting along. Left El Paso, Texas, suddenly with plenty of money for interior of Mexico. Brother has important information for him. Will pay for any information regarding his present whereabouts; and also his activities during past four years.—Address Sergeant E. R. Hart, M. D., N. A., U. S. A. A. S., General Mess, Camp Crane, Allentown, Pa.

STAPLETON, BOB. Civil engineer. Last heard of with the Jucaro and Moran Railroad Co., Cuba. Was previously in Mexico and Panama and was last heard of in Baltimore, Md., en route for New York City about ten months ago. Any information regarding same will be appreciated and rewarded by his friends.—A. R. Hall-Davis, Post-Office Box 1068, Havana, Cuba.

LOFTIS, EDWARD MARSHALL. Age 32, height 5 ft. 8 in., weight between 180 and 195, dark brown hair mixed with gray, brown eyes, light complexion, smooth shaven. Occupation, farmer. Last heard of in Iowa on Jan. 18. May be around his home in eastern Nebraska. In Barb, Thurston or Washington Counties. Reward for information.—Address 366, care of *Adventure.*

SLUDER, CHARLEY. Last heard of at Eureka, Kans., in 1908 or 1909. Heard he enlisted in the Army at Wichita a year or so later. Must be between 30 and 40 years old. Over 6 feet tall, dark hair, dark complexion and slightly bow-legged. Your "little cousin" Frank wants to hear from you. Communicate with—J. R. Hazen, U. S. S. *Illinois,* Fortress Monroe, Va.

REGENER, HERMAN. Write to your friend, CHARLIE PARKHILL, at L. C. McLain Sanatorium, St. Louis, 1913-14.—Address Charlie Parkhill, 1719 Hills Avenue, Tampa, Fla.

Inquiries will be printed three times, then taken out. In the first February issue all unfound names asked for during the past two years will be reprinted alphabetically.

HENDERSON, MRS. EDITH HOUSTON. Last heard of 8 years ago in New York in large store, probably art, books or stationary dept.——Address Mrs. K. M. A—B. 436 Lakewood Drive, Vancouver, B. C.

NILES, JOHN OCHES (father). Last heard of at St. Louis on the way to North Dakota about 32 years ago.—Address Mrs. Esther Niles Green, Montauk Ranch G. D., Billings, Mont.

NELSON, ERIK. Last heard of in Iowa 20 years ago. Any one knowing of him please write to his brother.—Address Swan Nelson, Tunnelhill, Pa., R. D. No. 1.

CROUSE, SAMUEL BLAKE. Age 30 years, height about 5 ft. 7 in. Last heard of in San Francisco, Calif., about 5 years ago. Intended to go to Texas on a ranch. His relatives would like to hear from him. Please write to—Pte. M. R. Crouse, Whitby Military Hospital, Whitby, Ontario, Canada, Dorm. No. 1.

WILSON, SAMUEL WILLIAM. Height about 6 ft. 3 in., weight about 200 lbs., complexion dark. Present age 38. Last heard from in New Westminster, Br. Columbia, Canada in 1900. Any information thankfully received by his brother—Address Chas. Wilson, 31 Huron Street, Clinton, Ontario, Canada.

BELL, JOHN (JACK) WATSON. Formerly had office with partner in New York—Tobacco—with factory at Richmond, Va. Last heard of in old country 27 years ago. Please communicate with—Mrs. A. D. Bell (Mrs. J. W. Bell) Suite 5, Lynden Lodge, Kitchener and Cotton, Vancouver, B. C.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

JOMES, R. C. (also known as ROY CLINTON.) Left him working as pantry boy on Str. *Capitol City* running to Sacramento from 'Frisco. Slim who was with him in Montana and New York would like to hear from him.—Address Pte. J. B. Riese, 1st Troop R. C. D., Stanley Barracks, Toronto, Ont.

HENDERSON, AL. Last heard of by letter mailed in Beardsly, Kansas. Before that was located at Humboldt, Arizona. He is a mining engineer. His wife inquires.—Address Alice Martin Henderson, Box 65, Cleveland, Ohio, Station B, care of E. A. Harper.

KRAUSE, CHARLES. Discharged from U. S. N. 1914 or 1915. Would be glad to receive any information regarding him. Last seen in Las Animas, Colorado, 1916. —Address Frank J. Miller, 2505 A St., Lincoln, Nebr.

FAIRCHILD, JOHN. My father, formerly of Texas, son of MRS. LUCY HARRY. Last heard of him in San Bernardino, Calif., where he went five years ago from Utah.—Address Dawson Fairchild, Oregon City, Oregon.

HAYNE, EMIL. Last heard of in 1913 in Houston, Texas. Shipped from Bremen to Galveston on the *Cassel* in August 1912 with me.—Address Gus Hansler, General Delivery, Portland, Oregon.

TINSLEY, THOS. RUSSELL. Brother. About 39 years old, tall and dark skinned. Worked for railroads as brakeman and conductor most of time; has worked on ranch some. Small reward.—Address J. J. Tinsley, Spartanburg, S. C.

USSHER, LIONEL NEVILLE. Also known as "BOBS," of Toronto, Canada; last heard of in Montreal, Quebec. Age about 20. Fair complexion. Have important information for you. Write—Address F. McLAREN, 11 Mutual St., Toronto, Canada.

Inquiries will be printed three times, then taken out. In the first February issue all unfound names asked for during the past two years will be reprinted alphabetically.

INGELOW, CRUMP, EMPEY, THURSTON, NOWELL, San Francisco before the earthquake. ALEXANDER HARRIFIELD, CASSIAR. Communicate with HAVELOCK SMITH, care of Hotel Metropole, Sydney, Australia.

DICKERSON, TOMMIE. Left Georgia just after the Civil War. Was last heard of in Wisconsin. Is about 75 years old if living. Any information will be gladly received.—Address S. L. BROWN, Townanda, Kansas.

FOSTER, DIXON or W. BERT FOSTER. Please give me address at once. Relative to E. D. C.—A. S. HOFFMAN, care of *Adventure.*

ROME, SERGEANT and CORPORAL CARROLL, U. S. Marines, Portsmouth Marine Barracks, Norfolk, Va., 1912-1913. They will remember me as the Scotch comedian Thanksgiving Day 1912.—Address Gunner R. B. PINCHIN, Fort Gervois, Ripa Island, Port Lyttleton, N. Z.

LA BRACHE, P. (commonly known as "FRENCHY"). Last seen was in Columbus, New Mexico, in the year of 1916. Kindly communicate with—SERGEANT WILLIAM E. GREER, U. S. Army Hospital, Hoffman Island, New York.

THE following have been inquired for in full in either the Mid-June or First July issues of *Adventure.* They can get name and address of inquirer from this magazine.

ANDERSON, ALEX; Arbuckle, Margaret; Aubrey; Bargery, William; Brandel, Jack; Burns, Ada; Dankel, Henry; Dattle, Arthur; Fisher, William Wright; Granville, Richard; Griffin, Tom; Hainze, Eugene; Hilgenhorst, John (John Silvester Gregory); Hilliard, Leon; Honifer, Gus.; King, Rodrick Barlo; King, Vance Herald; Lewis, Clayton J.; Lindegren, Miss Estelle and Mr. Enrest; Lucas, Jo.; McGovern, John; McInnes, Frank J.; McKay, Florence; Offer, George William; Park, John P.; Pendergrass, C. F.; Rembe, Edward A.; Rogerson, Wm. L.; Rutstein, Joe; Saltman, William; Sands, Clifford W.; Todd, Theodore W.; Vance, Thad.; Vreeland; Youker, Philip Luther (Louis).

HASTLAR GAL BREATH, Ruth Gilfillan, Lee Hays.—Jack P. Robinson.

NUMBERS L. T. 284, C. 293, W. 311, W. 312, L. T. 343. Please send us your present address. Letters forwarded to you at addresses given us do not reach you. Address HARRY ERWIN WADE, care *Adventure.*

THE TRAIL AHEAD

Besides the two virile novelettes mentioned on page 2, the First August Number, out on July 3, will contain nine short stories and a serial. Here they are:

Hip Shootin' *By Earl Ennis*

From the mesquite-covered stretches of the Mohave Desert to the snow lands of Canada is a long distance. And the methods of the Northwest Mounted Police are different from those of the outlaw hunters of the South. A grim tale of the California desert.

Square *By Robert J. Pearsall*

A street waif's struggle to break away from the grip of the underworld for the sake of an ideal.

John O'Damn *By Charles Beadle*

In the dripping jungle-lands of the Congo an American professor meets a group of baffling natives—the pygmies. And receives an honorary degree never before accorded to white man.

Sense of Balance *By Gordon McCreagh*

Members of our Aviation Corps must be perfect specimens of manhood. A story of what happens when a pilot fails to come up to the Corps' standards.

The Madness of Johnny Dyer *By G. A. Wells*

Johnny Dyer had all the symptoms of madness—delirium, lapses of memory and hallucinations. It was the sun, the M. D. said. But was it? A tale of queer happenings on a South Pacific island.

The Great God Ananzi *By Stephen Chalmers*

The attempts of the fruit trust to wrest the banana output of Jamaica from the Independents starts a fight that is intensified by the God of Cunning and native superstition.

For the Flag *A Four-part Story Part III*

By Thomas Addison

Jimmy Perry and his Central American friends engage in a hazardous enterprise to trap the German conspirators. There is lots of action in what takes place.

Maze of Memory *By S. B. H. Hurst*

By the folly of the impractical *Brennan*, the bookworm is plunged into a brutal fight. Although it takes place in Liverpool the wail of the restless sea is heard calling to its chosen masters.

Throw It Over on John Lund

By Hugh S. Fullerton

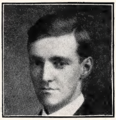
Combatting the hazards of forest fires, the families of *Lund* and *Barnes* battle for existence on the pirate-looted timber-lands of Michigan. A struggle that becomes precarious as the feud grows more bitter.

Dough or Dynamite *By W. C. Tuttle*

The movies come to Paradise and "*Telescope*" *Tolliver*, with his classic features, strives to become a screen star. But he finds the path to glory filled with something more than rocks.

First August Adventure

Augustus Van Gieson of New Jersey was out of a job at 65. To-day he is his own boss and earns $1,500.00 a year.



Fred D. Webster, of Penna., in odd hours adds $100.00 to $125.00 to his regular income.

Alexander Heath of Massachusetts, whose yearly income from magazine work is more than $5,000.00.

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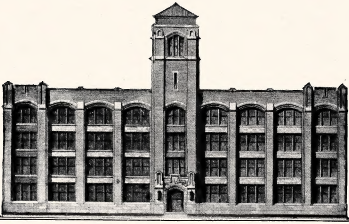

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THE DELINEATOR, founded 1868, has more than a million circulation in the United States—foreign editions in five languages—a power with the women of all nations.

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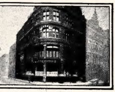

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The Magazine in a Million Homes